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## A Study of Consciousness in Indian Knowledge System and Yoga Darshana

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### Abstract:

In the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), consciousness is regarded as the fundamental reality that underlies the entire universe. It is understood not as a product of the brain but as an independent, self-luminous principle that makes all experience possible. The Upanishads describe consciousness as **Aatman** within the individual and **Brahman** as the universal consciousness, ultimately declaring both to be identical. Consciousness in IKS is considered eternal, unchanging, and all-pervading, and it serves as the ground of knowledge, perception, and existence. The mind, senses, and intellect are treated as instruments that reflect consciousness rather than produce it. IKS maintains that human suffering arises when consciousness becomes entangled with the fluctuations of the mind and worldly attachments. Therefore, the goal of life in this tradition is to realize one's true identity as pure consciousness rather than as the body or mind. Yoga Philosophy, based on Sankhya metaphysics, explains consciousness through the distinction between **Purusha** and **Prakruti**. Purusha is defined as pure, passive, witnessing consciousness that never changes and never acts. Prakruti includes the body, senses, mind, and intellect, all of which are constantly changing and active. Yoga teaches that confusion between Purusha (consciousness) and Prakruti (matter) leads to bondage and suffering. According to Patanjali, the mind (**chitta**) is the medium through which consciousness appears to function in the world. The mind undergoes constant modifications called **Vrutis**, which disturb clarity and hide the true nature of consciousness. Yoga defines its central aim in the sutra "**Yogah chitta-vrutti-nirodhah**", meaning that Yoga is the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind. When the mind becomes still, consciousness shines in its pure form without distortion or interruption. This inner clarity allows the practitioner to experience Purusha as separate from the mind and as the true Self. Yoga describes several states of consciousness, including waking, dreaming, deep sleep, and various forms of samaadhi. In samaadhi, mental activity becomes extremely subtle or ceases altogether, allowing the practitioner to rest in pure awareness.

**Key Words:** Aatman, Purusha, Prakruti, vrutis, consciousness,

**Consciousness in the Indian Knowledge System (IKS)-**

Indian Knowledge System regards **Consciousness (Chit / Chaitanya / Prajnya)** as the foundational principle of existence. It is the essence of the self and the ground of all knowledge.

### 1. Aatman as Pure Consciousness :-

एष त आत्मा द्रष्टव्यः श्रोतव्यो मन्तव्यो निदिध्यासितव्यः । Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (3.7.23)

This Self must be seen, heard about, reflected upon, and meditated upon. This statement affirms that consciousness is the most fundamental reality that must be realized through inner exploration. This Self must be seen, heard about, reflected upon, and meditated upon. The Upaniṣadic statement emphasizes that the Ātman, or the true Self, is the highest reality that every human being must strive to know.

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It asserts that the Self is not an external object but the innermost essence of one's own existence, and therefore it must be understood directly and personally. The phrase “द्रष्टव्यः” (to be seen) indicates that the Self must be realized or experienced through inner vision, not merely understood intellectually. The term “श्रोतव्यः” (to be heard) means that one must first listen to the teachings of the scriptures and the guidance of an enlightened teacher to gain correct knowledge about the Self. The instruction “मन्तव्यः” (to be reflected upon) implies that, after listening, one must logically contemplate the teachings to remove doubts and misunderstandings. The word “निदिध्यासितव्यः” (to be meditated upon) signifies deep meditation through which the truth of the Self becomes a direct, unbroken experience in the mind. Together, these four steps—hearing, reflection, meditation, and realization—form a complete spiritual method for understanding the nature of consciousness. The Upanishad teaches that liberation can be attained only when the Self is known fully in this manner, beyond thought and sensory perception.

Thus, the verse emphasizes that Self-knowledge is not optional; it is essential for overcoming ignorance and discovering the pure, eternal consciousness that is one's true identity.

## 2. Brahman as Consciousness :-

प्रज्ञानं ब्रह्म । Aitareya Upaniṣad (3.1.3)

Consciousness is Brahman. This establishes that the ultimate reality of the universe is pure consciousness. The statement “प्रज्ञानं ब्रह्म” is one of the four Mahāvākyas of the Upanishads and expresses the profound identity between consciousness (prajñāna) and Brahman, the ultimate reality. The verse teaches that the very essence of the universe is not matter, energy, or any physical element, but pure consciousness, which is the source of all existence. Consciousness here does not refer to ordinary mental awareness but to the timeless, infinite, self-luminous principle that enables all knowing, perceiving, and experiencing. By declaring that “Consciousness is Brahman,” the Upaniṣad states that the supreme reality is not something distant or separate, but the inner awareness that illumines every experience. This consciousness is not created by the body or mind; instead, the body and mind function because they are pervaded by this deeper consciousness. The teaching implies that all forms, names, and phenomena in the world arise from this universal consciousness and ultimately dissolve back into it. It also means that the individual self (jīva) is nothing other than this pure consciousness, though ignorance makes one identify with the mind and body. When one realizes that the consciousness shining within is identical with Brahman, the highest knowledge arises, and this realization destroys ignorance and brings liberation. Thus, the statement “प्रज्ञानं

ब्रह्म” affirms that consciousness is the foundational reality of the cosmos, the inner essence of every being, and the final truth to be realized through spiritual knowledge.

## 3. Identity of Individual and Universal Consciousness :

तत्त्वमसि । Chāndogya Upaniṣad (6.8.7)

**You are That.** This means that the individual consciousness (Ātman) is identical with universal consciousness (Brahman). The statement “तत्त्वमसि” (Tat Tvam Asi) is one of the great Mahāvākyas of the Upaniṣads and is spoken by the teacher Uddālaka to his son Śvetaketu. The word “Tat” refers to Brahman, the supreme, infinite, all-pervading reality that is the source of the entire universe. The word “Tvam” refers to the individual self, the conscious being who experiences life through the body and mind. The statement “Asi” means “are,” indicating an identity or absolute oneness. When taken together, the sentence proclaims that the individual self is not separate from the universal reality; rather, the two are fundamentally the same. This teaching eliminates the misconception that the self is limited, mortal, or confined to the body, and reveals instead that one's true nature is infinite consciousness. The Upaniṣad repeats this statement multiple times to emphasize that every being originates from, exists in, and ultimately is identical with Brahman. “You are That” does not mean that the body or mind is the supreme reality; it means that the pure consciousness within the individual is identical with the cosmic consciousness. This teaching removes the duality between the creator and the created, the knower and the known, and the inner and outer worlds. Realizing this truth leads to liberation, because one understands that one is not a limited being struggling in the world, but the eternal, infinite Brahman itself. Thus, “Tat Tvam Asi” is a direct instruction that one must turn inward and recognize the divine, limitless nature of one's own consciousness.

## 4. Consciousness as Self-Luminous :-

स्वयमेव ज्योतिर्भवति । Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (4.3.6)

The Self is self-luminous. This means consciousness does not require any other light to be known; it reveals itself and everything else. The statement “स्वयमेव ज्योतिर्भवति” means that the Ātman, or the true Self, shines by its own light and does not depend on anything else for its illumination. In this context, “light” does not refer to physical brightness but to the inner awareness that reveals all thoughts, perceptions, and experiences. The Upaniṣad teaches that objects are known only when they are illumined by an external light, but the Self requires no such illumination because it is the very source of knowing. The Self is called “self-luminous” because it is the consciousness that makes the mind, senses, and world intelligible; without it, nothing can be known. Even when the mind is inactive—as in deep sleep—the Self continues

to exist and remains the background awareness that later allows one to recognize that one slept. The verse implies that the Self is not an object that can be observed from outside; instead, it is the ever-present witness that illuminates all objects and experiences from within. This teaching also means that the Self is independent, eternal, and unchanging, because something that shines by itself cannot be diminished or altered by external conditions. By describing the Self as self-luminous, the Upaniṣad establishes that consciousness is the highest reality and the fundamental principle behind all forms of knowledge. When a person realizes that this self-luminous consciousness is their own true nature, they transcend ignorance and attain the insight that leads to liberation.

### 5. Purusha as Pure Awareness -

दुःखत्रयाभिघाताज्जिज्ञासा तदपघातके हेतौ । Sāṅkhya Kārikā -19  
The inquiry into the means of ending suffering arises from the impact of the three kinds of pain. This leads to the recognition of **Purusha**, the conscious principle that seeks liberation. The inquiry into the means of ending suffering arises from the impact of the three kinds of pain. This verse states that the motivation for philosophical inquiry begins when a person becomes aware of the three forms of suffering that affect life. The term “दुःखत्रयं” (duḥkha-traya) refers to the three categories of suffering recognized in Sāṅkhya philosophy- आध्यात्मिक (ādhyātmika) – suffering caused by one’s own body or mind आधिदैविक (ādhidāivika) – suffering caused by natural or supernatural forces आधिभौतिक (ādhibhautika) – suffering caused by other beings or external objects. The word “अभिघातात्” means **from the impact** or **from the striking force**, suggesting that suffering strongly affects and awakens a person. The verse explains that when a person deeply experiences these forms of suffering, it naturally leads them to seek a solution or a path that can remove suffering completely. The term “जिज्ञासा” means “the desire to know” or “inquiry,” indicating the beginning of the philosophical search for truth. The phrase “तत् अपघातके हेतौ” means “for the cause or method that removes that suffering,” showing that the purpose of inquiry is practical, not merely theoretical. Sāṅkhya philosophy teaches that this inquiry eventually leads to understanding the distinction between Purusha (pure consciousness) and Prakṛti (material nature), which is the key to liberation. Therefore, the verse emphasizes that spiritual and philosophical investigation arises not from curiosity alone but from a sincere desire to overcome the fundamental problems of human existence. It highlights that the ultimate aim of Sāṅkhya is to discover a solution that ends suffering permanently, not temporarily. Thus, this verse sets the foundation for the entire Sāṅkhya system by showing that the search for liberation begins when one

recognizes the pervasive nature of suffering and seeks a true remedy.

### 6. Purusha’s Nature :-

साक्षिचैतन्यम् । Sāṅkhya Kārikā – 20

Purusha is the witnessing consciousness. This clearly defines consciousness as distinct from the mind and body. The phrase साक्षिचैतन्यम् means that Purusha is not an active doer but a pure witness-consciousness that observes the activities of the mind and the workings of Prakṛti without itself undergoing any change. In Sāṅkhya philosophy, Purusha is described as eternally free, independent, and self-luminous, and it does not participate in actions, emotions, or mental modifications. Instead, it merely witnesses all experiences in the same way a light illuminates objects without being affected by them. The mind, senses, and body perform all functions, but their activities are known only because Purusha stands as the silent observer behind them. This witnessing nature of Purusha makes experience possible, because without consciousness, no perception, thought, or feeling could be recognized. Although Purusha is detached and inactive, its mere presence enables Prakṛti to operate, much like a magnet influences iron filings without itself moving. By understanding Purusha as witnessing consciousness, Sāṅkhya explains that liberation comes when one realizes that the Self is not the changing mind or body but the unchanging witness that simply observes them. This realization frees a person from identification with suffering and leads to ultimate spiritual freedom.

### Consciousness in Yoga Philosophy (Pātañjala Yoga Darśana) -

Yoga builds upon Sāṅkhya metaphysics and provides a **systematic method** to experience pure consciousness.

### 7. Purusha is Pure Witness

द्रष्टा दृष्टिमात्रः शुद्धोऽपि प्रत्ययानुपश्यः । Yoga Sūtra -2.20

The seer is pure consciousness, merely witnessing the mental activities. This is one of the most precise definitions of consciousness in classical Yoga. The sutra “द्रष्टा दृष्टिमात्रः शुद्धोऽपि प्रत्ययानुपश्यः” explains that the draṣṭā, or the seer, is the innermost Self who remains as pure consciousness and does not take part in any mental or physical activity. Patanjali teaches that this seer, identified as Purusha, is drṣṭi-mātra, meaning it is nothing but the power of seeing or pure awareness, without any attributes, qualities, or modifications of its own. Although this pure awareness is śuddha, meaning eternally pure, stainless, and untouched by the mind’s fluctuations, it appears to observe the changing mental patterns known as pratyaya because the mind reflects the light of consciousness. The sutra states that the seer “merely witnesses” the mental activities, which means that Purusha does not act, change, or transform; instead, it

simply illuminates whatever arises in the mind in the same effortless way that a lamp reveals objects placed before it. All thoughts, emotions, memories, and perceptions occur in the mind (citta), and they seem to belong to the Self only because consciousness reflects upon them. This mistaken identification leads to bondage, while clear discrimination reveals that the seer is always separate from the mind and completely unaffected by its movements. When a practitioner understands that the true Self is only the silent, immutable witness, they stop identifying with the mind and attain freedom from suffering. Thus, this sutra establishes the core Yogic insight that liberation comes from recognizing the distinction between the pure witnessing consciousness and the changing mental processes.

### 8. Mind's Fluctuations Hide Consciousness :-

योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः। Yoga Sūtra -1.2

Yoga is the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind. When the mind becomes still, consciousness reveals its true nature. The sutra defines Yoga not as a physical posture or ritual practice but as a state of inner mastery in which the mind's constant movements come to complete rest. Patanjali uses the term citta to refer to the entire inner instrument that includes mind (manas), intellect (buddhi), and ego-sense (ahamkāra), and this citta is normally in a continuous state of agitation due to thoughts, memories, desires, and sensory impressions. The word vṛtti refers to these fluctuations or modifications of the mind, which shape how one perceives the world and oneself. The term nirodha means not suppression but quieting, calming, or complete settling, so that the mind becomes clear, still, and stable like a peaceful lake.

### 9. Realization of Pure Consciousness :-

तदा द्रष्टुः स्वरूपेऽवस्थानम्। Yoga Sūtra -1.3

Then the seer abides in its own true nature. This means that pure consciousness becomes directly evident when the mind is silent. The sutra describes what happens when the mind becomes completely still, as taught in the previous sutra. Patanjali uses the word “तदा” (then) to indicate that this state occurs only when the fluctuations of the mind (citta-vṛttis) have been fully calmed through the discipline of Yoga. At that moment, the draṣṭā, or the seer—the innermost Self, also called Puruṣa—rests in its own svarūpa, meaning its true, original, and unchanging nature. This true nature is pure consciousness, untouched by thoughts, memories, emotions, or sensory impressions, and it remains constant whether the mind is active or still. When the mind is filled with activity, consciousness appears mixed with its contents, leading a person to identify with the body, the senses, and the mental patterns. However, when all mental modifications subside, the distinction between the seer and the mind becomes unmistakably clear. In that clarity, the Self shines not as an object of thought

but as the ever-present witness that requires no other means of knowledge to reveal itself.

The sutra indicates that the purpose of Yoga is not merely to quiet the mind for temporary peace but to make it so transparent that the practitioner can recognize their identity as pure, limitless consciousness, completely independent of all mental activity. When the mind is utterly still, the Self no longer appears entangled with thoughts or perceived limitations, and one experiences the freedom, stability, and completeness that belong to consciousness itself. This direct resting in one's true nature is called self-realization, and it is the foundation of liberation in Yoga philosophy. Thus, this sutra affirms that the culmination of Yoga is the state in which the seer abides effortlessly in its own pure essence, free from the illusions created by the fluctuating mind.

### 10. Misidentification with Mental Patterns

वृत्तिसारूप्यमितरत्र। Yoga Sūtra -1.4

At other times, the seer identifies with the mental modifications. Thus, ignorance (avidyā) is mistaking the mind for consciousness. The sutra explains what happens when the mind is not in the state of stillness described in the previous sutras. Patanjali states that “itaratra”, meaning “at all other times,” refers to every moment in ordinary life when the mind is filled with thoughts, perceptions, emotions, and memories. During these normal mental conditions, the draṣṭā, or the seer—the pure consciousness—appears to take on the form (sārūpya) of the mental modifications (vṛttis) that arise within the mind. This means that instead of remaining aware of itself as the unchanging witness, consciousness becomes mixed with and identified with whatever thought or emotion is present. When a thought of anger arises, the person feels “I am angry,” and when fear arises, they feel “I am afraid,” not recognizing that these states belong to the mind and not to the true Self. The mind continuously generates different vṛttis, and consciousness, by illuminating them, seems to adopt their shape, just as a clear crystal appears to take on the color of the object placed next to it. Patanjali emphasizes that this misidentification is the root cause of human suffering because it leads the seer to believe, “I am the body,” “I am the mind,” “I am limited,” or “I am bound.” In reality, the Self is never touched by these mental movements, but due to habitual confusion, it becomes entangled in the ever-changing patterns of thought. This sutra therefore establishes the contrast with the previous one: when the mind is still, the seer knows its true nature; when the mind is active and turbulent, the seer forgets itself and appears lost in the fluctuations.

### 11. Samādhi Reveals Pure Consciousness :-

ऋतम्भरा तत्र प्रज्ञा। Yoga Sūtra -1.48

In that state, consciousness is filled with truth-bearing wisdom. This higher consciousness is not constructed by

the mind; it is direct, intuitive knowledge. The sutra describes the special kind of knowledge that arises when the mind enters the highest state of concentration called nirvicāra-samādhi, where mental fluctuations have become extremely subtle or completely dissolved. Patanjali uses the term “ऋतम्भरा”, which means “filled with ṛta,” where ṛta refers to absolute truth, cosmic order, and reality exactly as it is. This indicates that the wisdom arising in this state is not based on memory, reasoning, inference, or past impressions; instead, it is a direct, flawless, and immediate perception of truth, free from distortion.

The word “प्रज्ञा” means higher intuitive knowledge or pure insight that arises when the mind is perfectly clear and silent. In ordinary states of mind, knowledge is influenced by personal biases, emotions, misconceptions, and the limitations of language and thought. However, in the profound stillness of samādhi, the mind becomes like a perfectly polished mirror that reflects reality without adding anything of its own. In this condition, the practitioner experiences a kind of knowledge that goes beyond the intellect and reaches the essence of things.

Patanjali emphasizes that this truth-bearing wisdom does not depend on sensory perception or logical deduction; it arises from direct contact between a purified mind and pure consciousness. Because the mind is completely free from impurities, this knowledge is said to be certain, luminous, and incapable of error, unlike ordinary knowledge which can be clouded by doubt or misperception. This state of clarity allows the practitioner to see the true nature of existence, the true nature of the Self, and the distinction between Purusha and Prakṛti with absolute certainty.

Thus, the sutra explains that when the mind reaches the highest refinement in deep samādhi, it is filled with a unique kind of wisdom that is inherently truthful and infallible. This truth-bearing consciousness becomes the foundation for liberation, because once a person sees truth directly, there is no possibility of returning to ignorance. In this way, Patanjali shows that Yoga is not merely a practice of concentration but a gateway to the highest and most authentic form of knowledge available to human consciousness.

## 12. Kaivalya: Absolute Freedom :-

पुरुषार्थशून्यानां गुणानां प्रतिप्रसवः कैवल्यम् । Yoga Sūtra - 4.34

Kaivalya is the return of the gunas to their source and the establishment of Purusha in its own nature. This means consciousness becomes free from matter and rests in its pure, independent state. The sutra describes the final goal of Yoga, known as Kaivalya, which is complete spiritual freedom. Patanjali explains that Kaivalya occurs when the guṇas, the three fundamental qualities of nature—sattva (clarity), rajas (activity), and tamas (inertia)—become purushārtha—śūnya, meaning they no longer have any purpose to serve for Purusha, the pure conscious Self. Throughout life, the guṇas create experiences, perceptions,

and forms in Prakṛti (nature), and these experiences exist to enable Purusha to gain discrimination between itself and the mind.

When perfect discrimination (viveka-khyāti) arises, Purusha clearly realizes that it is distinct from Prakṛti and its guṇas, and at that moment the guṇas withdraw from their active state. Patanjali calls this withdrawal “प्रतिप्रसवः”, meaning a “reabsorption,” “return,” or “involution” of the guṇas back into their original, unmanifest state. Once the guṇas no longer produce experiences, impressions, or reactions, the entire machinery of the mind ceases to function for the sake of the Self.

This cessation does not mean destruction of nature but the end of the guṇas’ influence over consciousness. With this withdrawal, the mind becomes completely still and transparent, and it no longer reflects or distorts the light of Purusha. In this absolute clarity, Purusha stands alone, resting in its own essential nature, which is pure, independent, infinite awareness. This state of abiding in one’s true nature is what Patanjali defines as Kaivalya, the ultimate liberation where consciousness is no longer entangled with change, suffering, or limitation.

## Conclusion:-

IKS explains consciousness as both **Ātman** (individual) and **Brahman** (universal), while Yoga calls this pure identity **Purusha**. The mind is material and unconscious, but consciousness gives it power to know, feel, and experience. When the mind is disturbed, consciousness appears mixed with thoughts; when the mind is still, consciousness shines by itself.

Through aṣṭāṅga yoga—**Yama, Niyama, Āsana, Prāṇāyāma, Pratyāhāra, Dhāraṇā, Dhyāna, Samādhi**—one gradually purifies, focuses, and transcends the mind. The final goal is to realize that one is not the mind, body, or intellect but pure, changeless consciousness.

Indian Knowledge System and Yoga Philosophy present a unified and profound vision of consciousness rooted in ancient textual wisdom. The Upanishads declare consciousness to be the ultimate reality; Sāṅkhya identifies it as the unchanging Purusha; and Yoga provides the practical method to realize it by stilling the mind. Through disciplined practice and deep insight, one discovers consciousness as self-revealing, infinite, and eternally free. This realization leads to mokṣa or kaivalya, the highest state of human evolution.

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