



Sue Hamilton

# INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

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# Preface

Indian philosophy in 35,000 words? Many would consider it impossible! And it is certain that of those who might be persuaded to attempt it, no two would handle it in the same way. My own approach to the diversity of the material for the purposes of this book is explained in Chapter 1. In any case, the primary aims of a very short introduction are to give a flavour, to lead the interested reader into a larger and more complex topic than the book can cover comprehensively, to make such a topic accessible to the beginner. These have been my guidelines. I hope that this book is also thought-provoking, both in introducing very different ways of thinking about the world we experience, and in the sense of nudging those who are interested towards further investigation of the subject. To this end, a list of recommended further reading is included at the end of the book.

When discussing philosophical thought in an introductory way, and working from non-English texts, one has to deal with two practical problems: the need to use technical terms associated with philosophical issues, and how best to translate key words and textual extracts. Technical terms I have tried to keep to an absolute minimum, but explanatory text boxes have been given where their usage is important enough to require the beginner to acquire familiarity with them. It should in any case be remembered that the terms themselves are less important than gaining an understanding of what they are referring to.

When it comes to translating, sometimes a key word is not translatable into meaningful English, and in such cases I have left it in its original Sanskrit or Pāli. I would ask the reader not to be put off by the unfamiliarity of these words. Most disciplines and subject areas – such as Latin, Greek, and works on other major linguistic or cultural traditions, mathematics and physics, and nowadays technology and computing – require the accepting and learning of a few key terms that initially might seem alien. In this book, the number of untranslated words is small, and in each case I think the clear context in which they are used will help the reader understand them.

When it comes to quoting longer extracts from primary texts, a greater problem is how literally one translates them. Not only does faithfulness to the grammar and syntax of the original frequently result in awkward and stilted English, and not only do many component words simply not have a meaningful English equivalent: it is also the case that literalness often fails to convey the point of what was being said. On balance, I think it is preferable to attempt to transpose original passages into meaningful English wherever possible. I have therefore tried to use ordinary English in contemporary style, and in the interests of clarity have not refrained in some cases from paraphrasing rather than more formally translating. My purpose overall has been to convey the conceptual point(s) of the extract as clearly as possible. If they wish to, readers may consult other published translations of the texts either for comparison or for alternative treatments of the material. In this book all translations or paraphrases are my own unless otherwise stated.

I would like to thank George Miller of Oxford University Press for inviting me to write this book, and for his gentle guidance and suggestions. Thanks also to Tracy Miller for invaluable advice during the editing process. And I am particularly grateful to King's College, London for allowing me to take sabbatical leave to write this book at a time when all academics are under enormous pressure to publish quantities of 'primary research'.

Very many thanks, too, to Muriel Anderson, Cecilia Storr, and Gay Watson for generously giving their time to read and comment on the draft manuscript. I accept full responsibility for the final version. To Richard Gombrich, colleague and friend, thank you for untold advice, criticism and support, not just in respect of this one project. And to Clare Palmer, for so long a wonderful sounding board and exchanger of ideas and thoughts, page 107 is especially for you.



# A Note on Languages and Pronunciation

Two languages used by the Indian tradition are referred to in this book, Sanskrit and Pāli. As is explained in early chapters, the tradition began when people who called themselves Aryans migrated from central Eurasia into the north of India, by way of what is now Pakistan, many hundreds of years BCE. The language in which they preserved their ritual practices was Sanskrit, which at a later date was codified into its ‘classical’ form by a grammarian called Pāṇini (see Chapter 4). In the history of languages, Sanskrit is known as ‘old Indo-Aryan’, and it is the language in which most Indian philosophical material was written. Over time, alongside classical Sanskrit, variant and more vernacular forms of the language emerged, now collectively known as ‘middle Indo-Aryan’ languages. One of these is Pāli, the language in which many of the earliest Buddhist texts are preserved. The close link between the languages is illustrated in the Sanskrit word *dharma*, which is *dhmma* in Pāli; *nirvāṇa* becomes *nibbāna* (or ‘nirvana’ in its Anglicized form).

Both Sanskrit and Pāli are phonetic languages based on the same alphabet. This is somewhat longer than the Roman alphabet with which we are familiar, and many of the extra letters are represented with what are called ‘diacritic marks’: for example ā as well as a; ñ, ṇ, and ṁ as well as n; ś and ṣ as well as s. Sometimes one finds English works transposing, say, ś into sh, because this is how ś sounds. Pronunciation is more accurate, however, if the diacritic marks are retained, so I have chosen to use the full Sanskrit and Pāli alphabet in this book.



Familiarizing oneself with the pronunciation can help in overcoming any initial feeling of strangeness, so here are some pronunciation guidelines.

- a** short, as in *hut*
- ā** long, as in *nirvana*
- i** short, as in *hit*
- ī** long, as in *feet*
- u** short, as in *put*
- ū** long, as in *boot*
- e** sounds like *may*
- o** sounds like *rope*
- ṛ** as in *pretty*
- s** as in *sit*
- ś, ṣ** variations on *sh*
- ñ** as in *canyon*
- ṇ, ṇ** as in *not*, with n sounded with the tongue at the back of the palate
- t** as in *tea*
- ṭ** as in *tea*, but with t sounded with the tongue at the back of the palate
- ṁ** as in *hang*
- k, g** always hard – as in *kill, gull*
- c, j** always soft – as in *chill, jug*
- h** is always sounded – as in *uphill* (so *Buddha*)
- r** is always sounded, as in Irish or American English (so *karma*; *kāma* means ‘desire’ – as in *Kāma Sūtra*)

Practising on a few examples can help in the familiarization process, so try the following:

ṛṣi, Himālaya, dhamma, saṃsāra, Nāgārjuna, Bhartṛhari, ānvīkṣikī, ātman, Mīmāṃsā, darśana, mokṣa, Vaiśeṣika, Śāṅkara, Sāṃkhya, Viśiṣṭa-ādvaita-vedānta

# Chapter 1

## Reason and Belief

### Richness and diversity in Indian thought

India has a long, rich, and diverse tradition of philosophical thought, spanning some two and a half millennia and encompassing several major religious traditions. Religion in the context of philosophy is particularly significant because traditionally in India it is believed that the role of philosophizing, in the sense of attempting to understand the nature of whatever it is one is focusing on, is directly associated with one's personal destiny. So philosophy is seen not in terms of a professional intellectual pursuit that can be set aside at the end of the working day, but as an attempt to understand the true nature of reality in terms of an inner or spiritual quest. One might say that what Westerners call religion and philosophy are combined in India in people's attempts to understand the meaning and structure of life – in the broadest sense. This is comparable more with the approach of Socrates than with religion as faith in revelation and philosophy as an academic discipline.

### Thinking and Believing

This point about the nature of Indian philosophy is an important one to grasp at the outset, so it is worth exploring it further. In the West, certainly since the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant separated God from what he thought could be learned about the nature of things by means of reasoning, there has been a clear divide between