

Intelligence and the Yogic Conception of Ṛtambharā Prajñā

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Abstract

The nature of intelligence has been examined from diverse philosophical and psychological perspectives. Modern psychology has developed theories of intelligence primarily in terms of general cognitive ability, specific mental abilities, reasoning, problem solving, adaptation, and measurable intellectual performance (Guilford, 1967; Spearman, 1927; Thurstone, 1938; Vernon, 1950; Wechsler, 1944). The classical Indian tradition, particularly the Sāṃkhya-Yoga framework, approaches intelligence from a broader epistemological and developmental perspective. Within this tradition, *buddhi* is associated with determination, ascertainment, discernment, and the capacity to arrive at confirmed knowledge. Thus, intelligence is not merely the possession of mental faculties but the effective capacity to determine what is appropriate and what is inappropriate. Yoga Darśana further maintains that cognition can be refined through disciplined practice and can culminate in *ṛtambharā prajñā*, a higher form of truth-bearing cognition described by Patañjali as distinct from knowledge derived through verbal testimony and inference (Arya, 2021, *Yoga Sūtras* 1.48–1.49). The present paper examines selected Western theories of intelligence in comparison with the Yogic conception of *buddhi*, analyzes the nature of *ṛtambharā prajñā*, and discusses the role of *sanskāras* in the dynamics and transformation of cognition. It further examines the progression from *ṛtambharā prajñā* to *nirbīja samādhi* and ultimately *kaivalya*. The paper argues that Yoga Darśana presents intelligence not as a fixed or exclusively functional capacity but as a developmental faculty that can be sharpened, purified, elevated, and ultimately transcended in the pursuit of higher knowledge and liberation.

Keywords

Intelligence, *buddhi*, Yoga Darśana, *ṛtambharā prajñā*, *sanskāra*, *samādhi*, Patañjali, cognition, *kaivalya*

1. Introduction

The question of intelligence has intrigued philosophers and psychologists across cultures. Modern psychology has devoted considerable attention to defining intelligence, identifying its constituent abilities, measuring individual differences, and explaining its relationship to learning, reasoning, adaptation, and problem solving. Theories proposed by Spearman, Thurstone, Guilford, Vernon, and Wechsler represent

important stages in the development of modern psychological approaches to intelligence (Guilford, 1967; Spearman, 1927; Thurstone, 1938; Vernon, 1950; Wechsler, 1944).

The classical Indian intellectual tradition approached the question from a substantially different starting point. Rather than treating intelligence exclusively as a measurable mental capacity, the Sāṃkhya-Yoga tradition situated cognition within a broader framework involving *buddhi*, discrimination, mental processes, consciousness, action, and liberation. In this framework, *buddhi* is associated with determination and ascertainment. The expression *adhyavasāyātmikā buddhi* conveys the character of *buddhi* as a faculty of determinate cognition and decision. Arya (2021) explains this Yogic understanding in the context of the broader psychological and philosophical system of the *Yogadarśana*.

This distinction is important. The possession of information, memory, analytical ability, or problem-solving skills does not necessarily imply the capacity to arrive at a correct or determinate judgment. From the Yogic perspective, hesitation, confusion, and indecisiveness indicate limitations in the functioning of discriminative cognition. Intelligence, by contrast, involves the capacity to determine what should be done and what should not be done.

The Yogic conception extends still further. Intelligence is not regarded as a fixed attribute. Through appropriate discipline, cognition can be sharpened, purified, and elevated. Patañjali describes a progressively refined form of cognition culminating in *ṛtambharā prajñā*, literally a truth-bearing or truth-filled form of higher cognition (Arya, 2021, *Yoga Sūtra* 1.48). This cognition is explicitly distinguished from knowledge derived through verbal testimony and inference (Arya, 2021, *Yoga Sūtra* 1.49).

The purpose of this paper is therefore to examine the Yogic conception of intelligence in relation to selected Western theories of intelligence and to explore the significance of *ṛtambharā prajñā* within the larger framework of Yogic psychology. The paper also examines the relationship between higher cognition and *sanskāras* and considers the progression from *ṛtambharā prajñā* to *nirbīja samādhi* and ultimately *kaivalya*.

2. Western Psychological Theories of Intelligence

Modern psychology has developed several major theories of intelligence. Although these theories differ in their assumptions, terminology, and methodologies, they have generally sought to explain the cognitive abilities underlying successful intellectual performance.

2.1 Spearman's Two-Factor Theory

Charles Spearman proposed a two-factor theory of intelligence in which intellectual performance was understood in terms of a general factor, designated *g*, and specific factors, designated *s*. The general factor represents a broad intellectual capacity that contributes to performance across different tasks, whereas specific factors account for abilities associated with particular activities (Spearman, 1927).

Spearman's theory was influential because it attempted to identify an underlying

general capacity while simultaneously recognizing differences among particular intellectual abilities. Intelligence was thus not reduced entirely to individual skills; rather, a general intellectual factor was proposed as contributing to performance across domains (Spearman, 1927).

2.2 Wechsler's Definition of Intelligence

David Wechsler adopted a broader functional approach to intelligence. He described intelligence as a global capacity involving rational thought, purposeful action, and effective interaction with the environment (Wechsler, 1944).

This definition is significant because it extends the meaning of intelligence beyond abstract reasoning. Intelligence, in this view, is related to purposeful conduct and effective adaptation as well as to cognitive processing (Wechsler, 1944).

2.3 Thurstone's Multifactorial Theory

L. L. Thurstone challenged the idea that intelligence could be adequately represented by a single general factor. In his theory of primary mental abilities, he emphasized several relatively distinct intellectual capacities that contribute to overall cognitive functioning (Thurstone, 1938).

This approach broadened the study of intelligence by recognizing that intellectual performance may involve different kinds of mental abilities rather than a single undifferentiated capacity.

2.4 Guilford's Structure of Intellect

J. P. Guilford further developed a multifactorial approach in *The Nature of Human Intelligence*. He proposed a complex structure involving different intellectual operations, contents, and products (Guilford, 1967). His model represented an important attempt to describe the multidimensional character of intellectual functioning.

2.5 Vernon's Hierarchical Model

Philip E. Vernon proposed a hierarchical model of intellectual abilities. His model placed general intelligence at a higher level, followed by broader group abilities and increasingly specific abilities (Vernon, 1950).

The hierarchical approach thus attempted to reconcile two apparently different observations: that individuals may possess a broad general intellectual capacity and that they may simultaneously demonstrate different levels of ability in particular areas.

2.6 General Characteristics of Modern Psychological Approaches

Taken together, these theories demonstrate that modern psychology has approached intelligence primarily through its factors, abilities, structure, and observable manifestations. General intelligence, specific abilities, reasoning, adaptation, and problem-solving performance have consequently become important dimensions of psychological investigation (Guilford, 1967; Spearman, 1927; Thurstone, 1938; Vernon, 1950; Wechsler, 1944).

The Yogic tradition approaches the problem differently. Instead of asking only

which factors or abilities constitute intelligence, it asks what constitutes determinate cognition, how discrimination operates, and how the cognitive faculty itself may be progressively refined.

3. The Yogic Conception of Intelligence

The Yogic conception of intelligence is rooted in the concept of *buddhi*. Within the Sāṃkhya-Yoga intellectual framework, *buddhi* occupies a fundamental position in the process of cognition and determination. It is associated with ascertainment, discrimination, and determination (Arya, 2021).

The expression **adhyavasāyātmikā buddhi** emphasizes the determinate character of *buddhi*. Intelligence, from this perspective, is not merely the possession of mental faculties. It is the capacity to arrive at a confirmed determination.

This distinction has significant psychological implications. A person may possess extensive information but remain unable to determine an appropriate course of action. Similarly, a person may possess considerable analytical ability but lack discrimination concerning the proper use of that ability. From the Yogic perspective, intelligence therefore involves not simply cognitive capacity but the successful determination of what is appropriate.

The Yogic understanding may consequently be represented as:

Information → Cognition → Determination → Discrimination → Appropriate Action

The highest function of intelligence is therefore not merely to accumulate information but to convert cognition into correct determination and appropriate action.

This understanding also makes intelligence a developmental capacity. The mind is not regarded as permanently fixed in its ordinary condition. Through disciplined practice, concentration, discrimination, and the progressive restraint of mental fluctuations, cognition can be refined (Arya, 2021; *Yoga Sūtras* 1.12–1.16).

Thus, Yogic psychology introduces an important proposition: **intelligence can be sharpened, purified, and elevated.**

4. From *Buddhi* to *Prajñā*

The Yogic conception of intelligence extends beyond ordinary decision-making. As the cognitive faculty becomes increasingly refined, it develops into higher forms of knowledge designated by the term *prajñā*.

Patañjali's discussion of *samādhi* (Arya, 2021, *Yoga Sūtra* 1.48) culminates in the statement:

ऋतंभरा तत्र प्रज्ञा ॥

ṛtambharā tatra prajñā.

The expression *ṛtambharā prajñā* is commonly understood as truth-bearing or truth-filled cognition. The term *ṛta* is associated with truth, order, or the proper order of

reality, while *prajñā* denotes higher knowledge or insight. Arya (2021) interprets this state as a highly refined mode of cognition arising through Yogic discipline.

The significance of *ṛtambharā prajñā* (Arya, 2021, *Yoga Sūtra* 1.49) becomes clearer in the following sūtra:

श्रुतानुमानप्रज्ञाभ्यामन्यविषया विशेषार्थत्वात् ॥

śrutānumāna-prajñābhyām anya-viṣayā viśeṣārthatvāt.

Patañjali states that this cognition has a subject matter different from that of *prajñā* derived through *śruta* and *anumāna*. Thus, *ṛtambharā prajñā* is not merely an accumulation of additional information obtained through ordinary means. It represents a distinctive mode of cognition arising in the advanced state of *samādhi* (Arya, 2021, *Yoga Sūtra* 1.49).

5. The Nature of *Ṛtambharā Prajñā*

5.1 Beyond Verbal Knowledge and Inference

The Yogic account recognizes ordinary means of knowledge, including verbal testimony and inference. However, Patañjali distinguishes the cognition arising at this advanced stage of *samādhi* from knowledge based upon *śruta* and *anumāna* (Arya, 2021; *Yoga Sūtra* 1.49).

This distinction is important for understanding the Yogic theory of intelligence. Intelligence at its highest level is not merely the ability to reason more quickly or solve problems more efficiently. The claim is that through the purification and stabilization of consciousness, a qualitatively different form of cognition becomes possible.

From the Yogic perspective, therefore, reasoning has an important but limited function. Inference operates through relations between known and unknown objects. Verbal knowledge depends upon an authoritative statement or received knowledge. *Ṛtambharā prajñā*, by contrast, is described as a higher cognition arising through the direct refinement of consciousness in *samādhi* (Arya, 2021, *Yoga Sūtra* 1.49).

5.2 Psychological Significance

From the standpoint of the psychology of intelligence, *ṛtambharā prajñā* represents a transition from ordinary cognitive functioning to a higher state of cognition. The Yogic system does not simply seek to increase the quantity of information available to the mind. It seeks to transform the condition of the cognitive faculty itself.

Consequently, the Yogic progression may be represented as:

Buddhi → Viveka → Prajñā → Ṛtambharā Prajñā

Here, *buddhi* represents the determining faculty; *viveka* represents discrimination; *prajñā* represents higher knowledge; and *ṛtambharā prajñā* represents truth-bearing cognition.

This provides a broader conception of intelligence than one based exclusively on performance or measurable cognitive factors.

6. Intelligence as a Capacity for Development

A major implication of the Yogic theory is that intelligence is not treated as a completely fixed attribute. Rather, it can be cultivated through disciplined practice.

Modern theories of intelligence have investigated individual differences in cognitive abilities and intellectual performance (Guilford, 1967; Spearman, 1927; Thurstone, 1938; Vernon, 1950; Wechsler, 1944). Yoga Darśana adds a different dimension by emphasizing the transformability of cognition.

The Yogic process involves the progressive stabilization and purification of the mind. Patañjali (Arya, 2021, *Yoga Sūtra* 1.2) defines Yoga as:

योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः ॥

yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ.

Yoga is thus concerned with the restraint or cessation of the modifications of *citta*. The subsequent development of higher cognitive states must be understood in this context (Arya, 2021; *Yoga Sūtras* 1.2–1.4).

The refinement of intelligence is therefore not isolated from the development of the individual. It is part of a larger process involving concentration, discrimination, mental discipline, and transformation of consciousness (Arya, 2021).

7. *Sanskāras* and the Dynamics of Intelligence

Indian psychology gives considerable importance to *sanskāra*, the impressions produced by experience, thought, and action. Within Yoga psychology, mental processes generate impressions that influence subsequent mental activity and behavior (Arya, 2021).

These impressions may be understood as seeds (*bīja*) that condition future cognition. Thus, cognition is not simply an isolated event. Previous experiences and actions leave impressions that can influence subsequent perception, thought, judgment, and action.

The dynamics may be represented as:

Experience and Action → Sanskāra → Mental Tendency → Subsequent Cognition and Action

Arya (2021) explains the role of *sanskāras* within the Yogic account of mental processes and the continuation of conditioned existence. In this framework, different impressions contribute to different tendencies and forms of experience.

The principle may be expressed conceptually as:

Sanskāra → Tendency → Cognition → Action → New Sanskāra

The process is therefore cyclical.

From the perspective of intelligence, this has an important implication. The development of intelligence requires more than acquiring new information. It also requires transforming the underlying impressions that influence cognition.

8. *Ṛtambharā Prajñā* and the Transformation of *Sanskāras*

Patañjali (Arya, 2021, *Yoga Sūtra* 1.50) gives a particularly significant role to the *sanskāra* generated by higher cognition:

तज्जः संस्कारोऽन्यसंस्कारप्रतिबन्धी ॥

tajjaḥ saṃskāro 'nya-saṃskāra-pratibandhī.

The *sanskāra* produced by this higher cognition acts as an impediment to other *sanskāras*. Thus, *ṛtambharā prajñā* is not merely an isolated intellectual experience. It has a transformative effect upon the structure of cognition itself (Arya, 2021; *Yoga Sūtra* 1.50).

This provides a developmental model of intelligence in which higher cognition gradually transforms the mental conditions that previously shaped ordinary cognition.

The process can be represented as:

Ordinary Sanskāras → Yogic Practice → Higher Cognition → *Ṛtambharā Prajñā*
→ Transformative Sanskāra

The important point is that even the *sanskāra* produced by higher cognition is not considered the final state. It remains a conditioning factor and must ultimately be transcended.

9. From *Ṛtambharā Prajñā* to *Nirbīja Samādhi*

The progression reaches a further stage in Patañjali's account (Arya, 2021, *Yoga Sūtra* 1.51):

तस्यापि निरोधे सर्वनिरोधान्निर्बीजः समाधिः ॥

tasyāpi nirodhe sarva-nirodhān nirbījaḥ samādhiḥ.

“When even that is restrained, through the restraint of all, there is *nirbīja samādhi*.”

The statement is significant because it indicates that even the refined *sanskāra* associated with higher cognition is ultimately to be restrained. Thus, the Yogic goal is not merely the attainment of increasingly powerful or accurate cognition. The final objective lies beyond conditioned cognition itself (Arya, 2021; *Yoga Sūtra* 1.51).

The progression can therefore be represented as:

Buddhi → Viveka → Prajñā → *Ṛtambharā Prajñā* → Sanskāra-nirodha → *Nirbīja Samādhi* → Kaivalya

This sequence should be understood within the soteriological framework of Yoga. *Nirbīja samādhi* is not simply a psychological state of superior concentration. It represents the culmination of the progressive restraint of conditioned mental processes.

10. *Nirbīja Samādhi* and the Universalization of Intelligence

The transition from *ṛtambharā prajñā* to *nirbīja samādhi* may be interpreted, from

the perspective of the development of intelligence, as a movement beyond individualized and conditioned cognition.

At ordinary levels, cognition is influenced by memory, experience, tendencies, desires, and accumulated *sanskāras*. At higher levels, these influences are progressively restrained. In *ṛtambharā prajñā*, cognition is described as truth-bearing; in *nirbīja samādhi*, even the seed of such conditioned cognition is ultimately restrained (Arya, 2021; Yoga Sūtras 1.50–1.51).

This progression may be described conceptually as the **universalization of individual intelligence**, provided that this expression is understood as an interpretive description rather than as a literal statement that Patañjali's Yoga system teaches the absorption of an individual consciousness into a universal consciousness.

In classical Yoga, the final objective is *kaivalya*. The process is therefore better understood as the complete disentanglement of *puruṣa* from the processes of *prakṛti* rather than simply as the merging of an individual consciousness into a universal consciousness (Arya, 2021).

11. The Vedas and the Cognition of the Ṛṣis

The Yogic conception of higher cognition also provides a philosophical framework for understanding the traditional status of Vedic knowledge. The Vedas are traditionally regarded as *śruti*, revealed or heard knowledge, and the ancient ṛṣis are regarded as seers associated with this knowledge.

Within the broader Indian epistemological tradition, the ṛṣis are not ordinarily understood simply as authors who constructed the Vedic mantras through ordinary intellectual processes. Rather, they are associated with a higher mode of apprehending knowledge. The Yogic discussion of purified cognition provides a philosophical context within which such a conception of the ṛṣis may be examined.

It is nevertheless important to distinguish *śruti* from *ṛtambharā prajñā* as technical categories. Patañjali specifically states that the cognition arising in the relevant state of *samādhi* has a subject matter distinct from cognition based on *śruta* and *anumāna* (Arya, 2021; Yoga Sūtra 1.49). Therefore, the two should not simply be equated.

Rather, the Yogic theory of higher cognition may be viewed as providing an important conceptual framework for understanding the Indian tradition's broader theory of knowledge and its account of the cognitive status of the ṛṣis.

12. Intelligence, Discrimination, and Action

The Yogic understanding of intelligence has practical consequences because *buddhi* is not isolated from action. Determination becomes meaningful when it guides conduct appropriately.

A person may possess substantial intellectual ability and yet make destructive decisions. Therefore, the highest development of intelligence cannot be identified simply with increased computational capacity, information processing, or problem-solving ability.

The Yogic conception places particular emphasis upon *viveka*, discrimination. Intelligence becomes progressively more valuable when it can distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate courses of action and between what is enduring and what is transient (Arya, 2021).

This relationship can be represented as:

Buddhi → Viveka → Determination → Karma

The development of intelligence is therefore connected with the development of action. Knowledge that does not lead to appropriate determination remains incomplete from the Yogic perspective.

13. Comparison With Modern Psychological Conceptions of Intelligence

The comparison between modern psychology and Yoga Darśana reveals both points of correspondence and fundamental differences.

Modern psychological theories have investigated general intelligence, specific abilities, multifactorial structures, hierarchical organization, reasoning, adaptation, and intellectual performance (Guilford, 1967; Spearman, 1927; Thurstone, 1938; Vernon, 1950; Wechsler, 1944).

Yoga Darśana includes dimensions that overlap conceptually with some of these concerns, particularly determination, discrimination, reasoning, and effective action. However, its scope is considerably broader. It does not regard intelligence as merely an instrument for successful functioning within the environment.

Instead, intelligence is situated within a developmental framework extending from ordinary cognition toward higher knowledge and ultimately liberation (Arya, 2021).

The difference may be summarized as follows:

Dimension	Modern psychological approaches	Yogic approach
Primary concern	Cognitive ability and performance	Cognition, discrimination, and transformation
General capacity	General intelligence or <i>g</i>	<i>Buddhi</i>
Specific abilities	Primary or specific mental abilities	Functional manifestations of cognition
Decision making	One manifestation of cognitive ability	Determinate function of <i>buddhi</i>
Higher cognition	Generally examined through advanced cognitive functioning	<i>Prajñā</i> and <i>ṛtambharā prajñā</i>
Development	Enhancement or measurement of cognitive abilities	Purification and transformation of cognition

Dimension	Modern psychological approaches	Yogic approach
Ultimate objective	Effective functioning/adaptation	Higher knowledge and <i>kaivalya</i>

The comparison should not be taken to mean that the two traditions are asking precisely the same question. Modern psychology generally investigates intelligence as a psychological construct, whereas Yoga Darśana places cognition within a philosophical and soteriological system.

14. Intelligence as a Spiritual and Evolutionary Capacity

The Yogic conception therefore places intelligence within a broader evolutionary framework of human development. Human cognition is not regarded as static. It possesses the potential for progressive refinement.

The progression may be expressed as:

**Ordinary Cognition → Determinate Buddhi → Viveka → Prajñā → Ṛtambharā
Prajñā → Nirbīja Samādhi → Kaivalya**

At the first level, cognition is influenced by ordinary mental fluctuations and accumulated impressions. Through disciplined practice, the determining faculty becomes increasingly discriminative. Higher knowledge develops, culminating in *ṛtambharā prajñā*. Even this higher cognition is ultimately transcended in *nirbīja samādhi* (Arya, 2021; *Yoga Sūtras* 1.48–1.51).

Intelligence is therefore not merely something that a human being possesses. It is a capacity that can be **developed, refined, purified, and ultimately transcended**.

This is one of the most distinctive features of the Yogic model. The highest stage of intelligence is not defined simply by the ability to solve increasingly complex problems. It is defined by the progressive transformation of the knower and the mode of knowing.

15. Conclusion

The question of intelligence has been approached differently in modern psychology and classical Indian philosophy. Modern psychological theories have contributed important models of general intelligence, specific abilities, multifactorial structures, hierarchical organization, reasoning, problem solving, and adaptation (Guilford, 1967; Spearman, 1927; Thurstone, 1938; Vernon, 1950; Wechsler, 1944).

Yoga Darśana begins from a different philosophical foundation. Its conception of *buddhi* emphasizes determination, ascertainment, and discrimination. Intelligence is therefore not merely the possession of mental faculties but the capacity to arrive at confirmed knowledge and appropriate determination (Arya, 2021).

The Yogic account further asserts that intelligence can be refined through disciplined practice. Patañjali's statement *ṛtambharā tatra prajñā* marks a significant stage in this progression (Arya, 2021; *Yoga Sūtra* 1.48). The subsequent sūtra explicitly distinguishes this cognition from that arising through *śruta* and *anumāna* (Arya, 2021, *Yoga Sūtra* 1.49). *Ṛtambharā prajñā* therefore represents not merely a greater quantity

of information but a distinctive mode of higher cognition.

The theory of *sanskāra* adds a further dimension. Cognition leaves impressions that influence subsequent mental processes, while the *sanskāra* generated by higher cognition inhibits other impressions (Arya, 2021; *Yoga Sūtra* 1.50). Even this refined impression is ultimately transcended, leading to *nirbīja samādhi* (Arya, 2021; *Yoga Sūtra* 1.51).

The Yogic conception consequently presents intelligence as a **developmental, transformative, and spiritual capacity**. It begins with *buddhi* as determinate cognition, develops through *viveka* and *prajñā*, reaches the higher state of *ṛtambharā prajñā*, and ultimately points beyond conditioned cognition toward *kaivalya*.

The central contribution of this model is therefore its conception of intelligence as more than intellectual performance. Intelligence is a faculty of the human being that can be cultivated and transformed through disciplined practice. Its highest development is not simply the capacity to know more, reason faster, or solve more difficult problems, but the refinement of the very process of knowing. In the Yogic framework, the ultimate development of intelligence is inseparable from the transformation of consciousness and the pursuit of truth and liberation.

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