

# Classical Yoga as neo-Smkhya : a chapter in the history of Indian philosophy

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CLASSICAL YOGA AS NEO-SĀMĀKHYA:  
A CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

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In an essay entitled “Knowledge and the Tradition Text in Indian Philosophy,” Eliot DEUTSCH argues that the “form” of presentation in Indian philosophy in terms of *sūtras* and *kārikās*, followed by *bhāṣyas*, *vārttikas*, *ṭīkā*s, and so forth, rather than inhibiting or constricting the development of Indian thought (which is the conventional view regarding the style or form of Indian philosophizing), instead, provides a continuing mechanism for creative development.<sup>1</sup> Says DEUTSCH:

...what constitutes the text in Indian thought is precisely the *sūtra* (or *kārikā*) and/or other authoritative sources, together with the ongoing exegetical work. In Indian philosophy we have as the basic unit what we might call the “tradition text”: the philosophical content of a “school,” in the best sense of the word.<sup>2</sup>

DEUTSCH comments further:

The basic commentary ... or the shorter commentaries, with the subcommentaries ... and glosses ... form, hermeneutically, integral parts of a continuing argument or text.

.... The exegetical material expands, refines, modifies arguments and ideas, and presents new ones, usually with increasing precision ..., seeking to bring greater systematic coherence to its body of ideas. The philosopher-commentator, in other words, seeks to remain faithful to his authoritative sources, but in his own creative terms. It is thus that we can speak of his work, together with its authoritative sources, as constituting a “tradition text.”<sup>3</sup>

What DEUTSCH intends with his notion of the “tradition text” is that a philosophical perspective cannot be reduced to one collection or book or a single author, but is, rather, a cumulative tradition unfolding over time involving many voices and numerous exegetical interventions.

1 Gerald James LARSON and Eliot DEUTSCH, eds., *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 165-173.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 170-171.

I have found DEUTSCH's notion of the "tradition text" helpful in my own work in trying to piece together certain developments in the history of Indian philosophy, specifically, with respect to the traditions of classical Sāṃkhya, classical Yoga, Abhidharma Buddhist thought and early Vedānta. All four of these represent "tradition texts" in DEUTSCH's idiom, namely, the *Sāṃkhyakārikā* of Īśvarakṛṣṇa, the *Yogasūtra* (hereafter = YS) of Patañjali, the *Abhidharmakośa* of Vasubandhu, and the *Brahmasūtra* of Bādarāyaṇa, the *Gauḍapādīya-kārikā* and the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* of Śaṅkara - and all of these, of course, with their exegetical traditions.<sup>4</sup> What has particularly interested me is the manner in which these "tradition texts" have tended to overlap in the unfolding of these traditions, not in the sense of the continuing polemics between the "schools" through the centuries, but, rather, in the sense in which the terminology of the "tradition texts" overlaps over time, and I would like to suggest in this article that attending to this overlapping in the development of the "tradition texts" may help us piece together some of the early chapters in the history of Indian philosophy.

I first approached this problem in an earlier paper published in *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik* entitled "An Old Problem Revisited: The Relation between Sāṃkhya, Yoga and Buddhism," in which I suggested that the classical Yoga philosophy as represented in Patañjali's YS appears to be

- 4 For the *Sāṃkhyakārikā* I have used the text and translation as found in my own book, Gerald J. LARSON, *Classical Sāṃkhya* (Delhi: Banarsidass, 1979; second revised edition), pp. 255-277; for text and translation of the YS and the commentaries of Vyāsa and Vācaspatiśiśra, I have used Ram Shankar BHATTACHARYA, ed., *Pātañjala-Yogadarśanam* (Varanasi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 1963) and J. H. WOODS, trans., *The Yoga-System of Patañjali* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914; Harvard Oriental Series 17); for text and translation of Vasubandhu's work I have used Swami Dwarikadas SASTRI, ed., *Abhidharmakośa and Bhāṣya of Ācārya Vasubandhu with Sphuṭārthā Commentary of Yaśomittra*, 2 volumes (Varanasi: Bauddha Bharati, 1981) and Leo M. PRUDEN, trans., Louis DE LA VALLEE POUSSIN's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, 4 volumes (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1988-90) as well as Stefan ANACKER, trans., *Seven Works of Vasubandhu* (Delhi: Banarsidass, 1984); for the Sanskrit text of Gauḍapāda and Śaṅkara, I have used the *Works of Śaṅkarācārya*, Volumes I, II, and III (Delhi: Banarsidass, 1964; Government of India Project for Important Sanskrit Books) and Vidhushekhara BHATTACHARYA, trans., *The Āgamaśāstra of Gauḍapāda* (Delhi: Banarsidass, 1989 reprint of 1943 edition), and George THIBAUT, trans., *The Vedānta Sūtras of Bādarāyaṇa*, 2 volumes (New York: Dover Reprint, 1962; Sacred Books of the East, XXXIV and XXXVIII).

a hybrid formulation derived from the “tradition text” of the old Sāṃkhya philosophy and the early “tradition text” of Buddhist philosophizing as found primarily in the *Abhidharmakośa* and *Bhāṣya* of Vasubandhu.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the “tradition text” of classical Yoga philosophizing together with the “tradition text” of Vasubandhu’s work appear to feed directly into the “tradition text” of Gauḍapāda and Śāṅkara, or, in other words, appear to be constitutive of the “tradition text” of Advaita Vedānta.

In this present article I want to move the discussion one step further by trying to understand the reasons for the incorporation of what appears to be the Buddhist “tradition text” into the “tradition text” or *sūtrapāṭha* of the YS and what this means for trying to piece together the history of Indian philosophy in the first centuries of the Common Era.

First of all, however, let me offer a quick summary of the extent of Buddhist terminology in the Sāṃkhya, Yoga and Vedānta traditions. It has been recognized, of course, since DEUSSEN and DASGUPTA that there are many Buddhist terms in the YS.<sup>6</sup> Especially the *sūtras* in Book IV (the Kaivalya Pāda) have often been cited as being under heavy Buddhist influence, since it appears to be clear that in *sūtras* 16-21 of Book IV the compiler of the YS is responding to the consciousness-only notion of Yogācāra Buddhist thought. Beginning with DASGUPTA and coming down to FRAUWALLNER, many scholars have therefore dismissed Book IV of the YS as a later appendage or interpolation.

The problem, however, cannot be so easily swept away, for, as Louis DE LA VALLEE POUSSIN demonstrated years ago, the presence of Buddhist terminology in the YS is not only found in Book IV but extensively in the

5 Gerald J. LARSON, “An Old Problem Revisited: The Relation between Sāṃkhya, Yoga and Buddhism,” *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik*, Volume 15, 1989, pp. 129-146. An expanded version of this original article was presented at the Xth World Sanskrit Conference, Bangalore, India, in January 1997. Yet another version will appear in a Festschrift for Eliot DEUTSCH, entitled “The ‘Tradition Text’ in Indian Philosophy for Doing History of Philosophy in India” (forthcoming, Open Court Publishing Co.).

6 Cf. S. N. DASGUPTA, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Volume I (Cambridge: The University Press, 1963), pp. 229-230. Cf. also E. FRAUWALLNER, *Geschichte der indischen Philosophie*, Volume I (Salzburg: Otto Muller Verlag, 1953), pp. 408 ff., for FRAUWALLNER’s discussion of the YS and its composite structure with at least two distinct kinds of Yoga, namely, the Yoga of Insight (or “cognitive intensive” Yoga) (Books II and III) versus the Yoga of Suppression (or “cognitive restrictive” Yoga) (Book I).

first three Books as well. LA VALLEE POUSSIN has cited well over a hundred terms or notions that appear to be common to both Yoga philosophy and Buddhist philosophy, some fifty of which LA VALLEE POUSSIN has traced to the *Abhidharmakośa* and *Bhāṣya*, that is, to Sarvāstivāda, Sautrāntika and early Yogācāra contexts.<sup>7</sup> Some of the more important of these terms are the following: *śraddhā*, *vīrya*, *smṛti*, *samādhi*, *prajñā*, *bīja*, *vāsanā*, *āśaya*, *nirodha*, *kleśa*, *dharma*, *lakṣaṇa*, *avasthā*, *bhūmi*, *dharmamegha*, *samāpatti*, *pratipakṣabhāvanā*, and so forth.

Moreover, as a student of classical Sāṃkhya philosophy, I was struck by the curious fact that these Buddhist terms (this Buddhist “tradition text,” if you will), or perhaps better, these terms that are jointly shared by the YS and Buddhist textual environments (especially the *Abhidharmakośa* and *Bhāṣya*) are totally absent from the Sāṃkhya textual environment or “tradition text.” This led me to the rather obvious conclusion that the *Yogasūtrapāṭha* represents a hybrid formulation, a conflation or, if you will, a new “tradition text” combining the old Sāṃkhya philosophy and the early Buddhist philosophy. I then identified this hybrid formulation with the work of Vindhyavāsin, the Sāṃkhya teacher, thereby agreeing with a suspicion that FRAUWALLNER had expressed in passing in his treatment of the history of Yoga, and suggested that this philosophical conflation becomes the ground upon which much of the later Vedānta philosophizing of Gauḍapāda and Śaṅkara develops.<sup>8</sup>

The first stream in the Yoga conflation, namely, the old Sāṃkhya philosophy might well be characterized as “discernment philosophy” (because of its focus on *adhyavasāya* or “reflective discernment” by the *buddhi* and by its focus on *vyakta-avyakta-jñā-vijñānāt*, cf. *Sāṃkhyakārikā*, verse 2, or, in other words, “the reflective discrimination of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*). Its principal *pramāṇa* is *anumāna* or inferential reasoning. Its ontology is an eccentric dualism of primordial materiality and contentless consciousness. Its epistemology is a critical realism, based upon its assertion of *prakṛti* as *triguṇa*, and its philosophy of mind is reductive materialist, that is to say, there is no mind-body or thought and extension dualism in Sāṃkhya.

7 Louis DE LA VALLEE POUSSIN, “Le Bouddhisme et le Yoga de Patañjali,” *Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques*, 5 (1936-37), pp. 223-242.

8 FRAUWALLNER, *Geschichte der indischen Philosophie*, Volume I, pp. 408 ff.



The second stream in the Yoga conflation, namely, the old Buddhist philosophy, might well be characterized as “*nirodha-samādhī*” philosophy (because of its focus on meditation and its pursuit of altered states of awareness). Its principal *pramāṇa* is *pratyakṣa* or perception. Its ontology is pluralist, and its epistemology is naive realism (Sarvāstivāda) or representationism (as, for example, Sautrāntika and the later Yogācāra). In terms of its philosophy of mind, it is also reductive materialism in the sense that it like the Sāṃkhya also affords no special status to the “private life of the mind.”

To identify these two streams of philosophizing, however, is not to say that classical Yoga philosophy is nothing more than a combination of Sāṃkhya and Buddhist thought. It is, rather, an updating of the old Sāṃkhya, a creative intervention in the “tradition text” of Sāṃkhya in an attempt to bring the old Sāṃkhya into conversation with many of the issues that were developing in the early classical period, that is, *ca.*, the fourth and fifth centuries of the Common Era. The hybrid formulation, or this new and updated “tradition text” is a kind of Neo-Sāṃkhya (hence, my inclination to agree with FRAUWALLNER and others that it is primarily the creative innovation of Vindhyavāsin), and, thus, it is neither a mistake nor an accident that the *Yogasūtrabhāṣya* is entitled *Sāṃkhyaprabhāṣya*, or “A Commentary on an Interpretation of the Sāṃkhya.”

It is instructive to see how the Sāṃkhya of the YS differs from the old Sāṃkhya of Īśvarakṛṣṇa, for by seeing the points of difference it becomes clear how the old Sāṃkhya is being upgraded or brought up to speed, as it were, with the philosophical issues being debated in the classical period. The conventional or textbook discussions of the differences between the Yoga philosophy of Patañjali and the Sāṃkhya philosophy of Īśvarakṛṣṇa usually focus on two main differences, namely, (a) that whereas Sāṃkhya represents the theoretical basis for meditation, Yoga represents the practical implementation or praxis; and (b) that whereas Sāṃkhya is non-theistic (*nirīśvara*), Yoga incorporates the notion of God (*īśvara* or *seśvara*) in its presentation of the classical system of meditation by way of accommodation to popular sentiment. Both characterizations are partially correct, but a careful study of the *Yogasūtrapāṭha*, the relevant Buddhist texts and terminology (especially from Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa* and *Bhāṣya*), and the Sāṃkhya corpus, indicates that the differences are much more thoroughgoing. Six differences are especially salient:

1. Where classical Sāṃkhya speaks of *buddhi*, *ahamkāra* and *manas* as three distinct faculties that make up the *antaḥkaraṇa* or “internal organ,” classical Yoga philosophy reduces the three to one all-pervasive *citta* or “mind-stuff” (cf. YS I. 2; I. 37 and II. 54). The “thirteenfold instrument” (*trayodaśa-karaṇa*) of Sāṃkhya (made up of intellect, ego, mind, the five sense capacities and five action capacities) becomes, then, for Yoga only an elevenfold instrument, or even more simply, the all-pervasive *citta* itself. The term “*citta*,” of course, appears variously in the ancient literature, both Brahmanical and Buddhist, but it is hard to avoid the parallel with discussions of “*citta*” in Sautrāntika and Vijñānavāda Buddhist contexts in particular. The Yoga view, however, stresses the objectivity or non-sentience of *citta*, thus making *citta* almost synonymous with *prakṛti* (cf. YS IV. 19). A pure contentless consciousness (*puruṣa*) is needed to render the *citta* and its modifications capable of self-awareness (cf. YS IV. 18-25).

2. Whereas classical Sāṃkhya speaks of the thirteenfold instrument wrapped, as it were, in the five subtle elements, as the “eighteenfold” subtle body (*sūkṣma-śarīra*) that transmigrates at death to a new rebirth body, the simpler and more sophisticated Yoga view is that if the *citta* is all-pervasive, at the moment of death, there is an immediate transference to a new embodiment, hence, obviating a need for a subtle body. Here again the parallel with Buddhist (and Jain) discussions is obvious, with the Theravādins (and classical Jain thought) like the Yoga philosophy arguing that there is no need for a subtle body (*antarābhāva*), and with the Sarvāstivādins and other Buddhist schools arguing for some sort of subtle body. Interestingly, on this point, the *Abhidharmakośa* discussion comes out closer to the old Sāṃkhya view of a need for a subtle body in contrast to the Yoga view which appears to relate to the Theravāda (and Jain) rejection of a subtle body.

3. Whereas classical Sāṃkhya deals with what can be called the phenomenology of experience in terms of the fifty components of the *pratyayasarga* (the so-called “intellectual creation” of five misconceptions, twenty-eight incapacities, nine contentments and eight attainments), which, together with the ten “basic principles” (*mūlikārthas*) make up the group of sixty or the “*śaṣṭitantra*,” Yoga greatly simplifies the description of phenomenal experience in terms of the “transformations” (*vṛttis*) of “awareness” (*citta*) in terms of *pramāṇa* (correct awarenesses through the

means of knowledge), *viparyaya* (incorrect awarenesses), *vikalpa* (verbal constructions or discourse), *nidrā* (sleep) and *smṛti* (memory) (cf. YS I. 5-11). Clearly the Yoga idiom is a more sophisticated philosophical account and closely mirrors the classical Indian philosophical discussions of *pramāṇa*-theory, theory of error, theory of language and meaning, theory of states of awareness and theory of memory that are to be found in Buddhist, Nyāya, philosophy of language, and so forth, environments.

4. Whereas classical Sāṃkhya deals with the issue of time and transformation solely in terms of the theory of *guṇa-pariṇāma*, Yoga philosophy offers a sophisticated account of time and transformation in terms of momentariness (*kṣaṇa*, cf. YS IV. 33) and a theory of the three perspectives on change and temporary transformation (cf. YS III. 13-14), namely, change in *dharma*, change in *lakṣaṇa* and change in *avasthā* (“...*dharma-lakṣaṇa-avasthā-pariṇāma*...,” cf. YS III. 13). Change in *dharma* is the change of characteristic (a lump of clay becoming a pot), change in *lakṣaṇa* is the change of past, to present and, finally, to future (lump of clay, pot, eventual broken pieces); and change in *avasthā* is the change in any object as it grows old (the pot newly made, the pot as it ages, and the pot as it becomes old). As is well-known, the Buddhists (Sarvāstivādins, Sautrāntikas and Vijñānavādins) all debated the problem of change in precisely these terms. Whereas the Buddhists chose from among these possibilities (and others as well) (as discussed presumably in the *Mahāvibhāṣā* and among the *Vaibhāṣikas*), the Yoga philosophy accepts all three explanatory modes and relates them to its theory of the *dharmin* (cf. *Yogasūtra* III.14), or, in other words, the Sāṃkhya theory of *satkāryavāda* and the notion of an abiding substance over time (*prakṛti*). Sāṃkhya philosophy, therefore, is provided with a sophisticated theory of change and transformation within the developing idiom of classical discussions of change and transformation, thereby filling a glaring gap in the old Sāṃkhya “tradition text” and at the same time getting beyond the hopeless Buddhist arguments of trying to salvage a notion of time with a theory of momentariness that consistently undercuts any meaningful notion of temporality.

5. Whereas classical Sāṃkhya does not mention God and is considered for the most part (at least in its classical formulation) to be *nirīśvara*, in the sense that a creator God is really not necessary given the overall



metaphysical account of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, the Yoga philosophy develops an interesting theory of God, which, on one level, follows a Sāṃkhya orientation in that God is not a creator but, rather, one among the plurality of *puruṣas* (*puruṣa-viśeṣa*, cf. YS I. 23-24), but which, on another level, nicely answers the Buddhist critique of God (as well as the Jain critique) (both of which argue against God as creator) while at the same time putting the Sāṃkhya-Yoga God or Guru or Primal Knower in precisely the same condition as the Buddhist and Jain “omniscient ones” (*sarva-jñas*) (cf. YS I. 25). The old Sāṃkhya had simply not addressed the issue of God because it was irrelevant from the perspective of the metaphysic and theory of knowledge. With the rise of Buddhist and Jain philosophizing, however, and the emergence at about this same period of Nyāya theistic speculation, the issue of God became much more pressing, and it can be argued that the Yoga philosophy nicely fills in the lacunae from the old Sāṃkhya “tradition text.” In this regard, it should be stressed that most of the scholarship on the history of Indian philosophy has missed the importance of the theological discourse in the Yoga “tradition text.” From the time of GARBE, KEITH and DASGUPTA all the way down to FRAUWALLNER, the Yoga theological “tradition text” has been dismissed as an add-on in response to popular sentiment. It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that the theology of the Yoga “tradition text” is a fundamental creative intervention in the unfolding classical Indian philosophical discussions of theology.

6. Finally, and perhaps of greatest importance, whereas classical Sāṃkhya had developed its soteriology largely in terms of the simple “discernment” of the difference between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* (*vyakta-avyakta-jñā-vijñānāt*) and arguing for its ultimate principles on the basis of inferences of the *sāmānyato-dṛṣṭa* type (that is, arguing to what is imperceptible in principle on the basis of certain general and necessary features of what is perceptible), the Yoga philosophy develops a much more sophisticated and detailed theory of “discernment” based on *samādhis* (altered states of awareness) of the *samprajñāta* type (that is, intentional awarenesses) and the *a-samprajñāta* type (that is, non-intentional or “*nir-bīja*” awarenesses) (cf. especially all of Book I and Book IV of the YS in this regard as well as major sections of Books II and III as well). The former are what FRAUWALLNER once characterized as the “cognitive intensive,” whereas the latter are what might be called the “cognitive restrictive.” FRAUWALLNER, being largely an Indologist and not sufficiently attuned to

the relevant philosophical issue, made the unfortunate suggestion that, therefore, there are two types of Yoga patched together in the YS, clearly missing the significance of the obvious philosophical issue involved, that is to say, the difference between intentional and non-intentional awarenesses. In any case, in this regard Yoga brings to bear old Indic traditions of meditation that focus on *dhāraṇa*, *dhyāna*, *samādhi*, *nirodha*, *samāpatti*, and so forth, to be actualized in the *aṣṭāṅga-yoga* (cf. YS II. 28 ff.) and the *kriyā-yoga* (cf. YS II. 1 ff.) Whether these old practices and notions are originally in Brahmanical or Buddhist environments (or both!) is difficult to determine, but the Yoga philosophy brings these old notions into a masterful synthesis that provides both a theoretical as well as practical account of the old Sāṁkhya discernment of the distinction between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. The compiler of the YS is familiar with the discussions of meditation in the older Brahmanical and Buddhist texts, and he nicely adapts them to the structures of Sāṁkhya philosophy. It could well be the case, of course, that there were old Yoga traditions of a pre-philosophical kind from which Brahmanical tradition, classical Yoga philosophy and Buddhist philosophy drew. What is important to recognize, however, is that these old meditation notions and theories are now updated by the Yoga discourse into a revitalized Sāṁkhya “tradition text” in a manner that provides a sophisticated philosophical psychology for the classical period.

Earlier I stated that these six differences between classical Sāṁkhya and Yoga are especially salient, since they show in each instance an advance in philosophical sophistication on the side of Yoga philosophizing in comparison to the old Sāṁkhya. In other words, it becomes obvious that the Yoga philosophy of Patañjali is a good deal later than the old classical Sāṁkhya of Īśvarakṛṣṇa. Furthermore, the Yoga philosophy is in polemical contact with Buddhist thought, not only of the Sarvāstivāda and Sautrāntika type but of the later Vijñānavāda type as well. It also becomes clear, however, that although the Yoga philosophy is in polemical contact with the Buddhist “tradition text,” and, indeed, makes extensive use of the new philosophical discourse coming into use in the classical period, each of the innovations introduced in the Yoga philosophy has for its purpose a clarification and extension of the old Sāṁkhya philosophy. In other words, the Yoga “tradition text” is very much a “*Sāṁkhya-pravacana-bhāṣya*,” that is, a “commentary on the expressions of the Sāṁkhya (philosophy).”

By way of conclusion, let me say that DEUTSCH's notion of the "tradition text" has been helpful to me in two distinct senses. First, from the perspective of doing history of philosophy in India, if one were to ask, whatever happened to the old Sāṃkhya philosophy, one could well give the answer: there it is in the updated and creative innovations of the "tradition text" of Yoga. In other words, there is no such thing as "old Sāṃkhya." There is, rather, a growing, evolving "tradition text." Moreover, this updated and creative innovation of the Sāṃkhya-Yoga "tradition text" feeds directly into the emerging "tradition text" of Gauḍapāda's and Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta. It has been said that western philosophy is a series of footnotes on Plato. I am inclined to say something similar, *mutatis mutandis*, about Sāṃkhya: Buddhist philosophy and terminology, Yoga philosophy, early Vedānta speculation and the great regional theologies of Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism are all, in an important sense, footnotes and/or reactions to a living "tradition text" of Sāṃkhya. That is, from the very beginning of philosophical reflection in India and continuing well into medieval times, the Sāṃkhya appears to have provided an intellectual code or framework on which all other traditions (whether Hindu, Buddhist or Jain) felt obligated to comment. This is not to claim that these many traditions of Indian philosophizing agreed with the ontology or the epistemology of Sāṃkhya. To the contrary, most schools of Indian philosophizing begin with a rigorous critique of the Sāṃkhya. It is only to say that almost all traditions of Indian philosophy viewed the Sāṃkhya as a crucial intellectual position with which they had to deal.

Second, and much more important, however, from a philosophical perspective, DEUTSCH's "tradition text" has put us all on notice that, finally, Indian philosophy is not Indology, Buddhology, Sanskrit or area studies, important as these disciplines are. It is first and foremost creative philosophizing. When all of the Indological and Sanskritic has been done, we are only at the threshold of the truly exciting task, that is, taking up the "tradition text" and "doing" Indian philosophy for our own time!