Samkhya Philosophy

Yoga Veda Institute
Introduction to Samkhya

Ayurveda is literally translated as ‘Knowledge of Life’. So, even though this knowledge may be scientific, it is also very much a philosophical view of life.

There are six major philosophical views, or perspectives in India. Think of it as an object, which can be viewed six different ways- you can have a frontal view, back view, birds eye view, a long distant view, an extreme close up, and so on. Similarly, Knowledge and Life can also be seen with different perspectives. In India, it’s referred to as the Shad Darshan {the six philosophies of life}.

These six perspectives or philosophies, whereby, we view or experience ‘life’ are:

• Samkhya {Theory of creation, Duality and Enumeration} Seer Kapila Muni

• Nyaya {Logic and Reasoning} Seer Gautama Rishi

• Vaisheshika {Unique Aspect} Seer Kanada

• Mimasa {Ritual} Seer Jaimani

• Yoga {Union – practical application of Sankhya} Seer Patanjali

• Vedanta {Study of Veda Sutras} Seer Veda Vyasa

In this program we are focusing on Samkhya, and Vedanta. Among these six perspectives and philosophies Ayurveda has been influenced most by Samkhya. There have been influences from other philosophies like Mimamsa, Yoga and Vedanta as well.
Definition of Samkhya

Samkhya Philosophy translates as “Theory of Numbers or Enumeration” and subtle principle of energies that govern the universe, and all the living entities. It is impossible to understand Ayurveda without understanding Samkhya Philosophy.

Mentions of Samkhya are found in various ancient texts, however, we will focus on ‘Bhagavata Purana’ and teachings of Kapila, and Caraka Samhita. Samkhya is one of the six perspectives or philosophies that influenced Ayurveda. The founder of Samkhya Philosophy is Sage Kapila. According to sage Kapila, The desire to create and procreate is a natural instinct within every one of us. The reason behind is the universe itself. Universe created us. And, being a part and parcel of the universe – we have the same desire. Just like in the Dao symbol, we have the yin and yang – male and female part – two sides of a same coin. Similarly the energy of the universe also has two sides. There is Purusha and then there is Prakruti. The Male Divine or Purusha has a desire to witness himself through the creative potential of his own feminine energy, the Prakrati. After the ‘divine’ breathed OM and thus the duality of the ego {being male and female} into life.

Creation of universe ultimately originates within the divine love between purusha and prakrati and their desire to manifest that love. Samkhya Philosophy is the theory of the creation of universe through 24 subtle elements.
Samkhya Philosophy

In order to understand Ayurveda, it is important to grasp an understanding of Samkhya Philosophy. There are many different explanations of Samkhya Philosophy. The explanation of samkhya here, may be slightly different from other explanations that you have read, or heard. It is based on the description of Samkhya described in the ancient text, called Bhagavad Purana.

Samkhya is an understanding of the universe and the way that we fit into it by understanding how the gross elements have evolved from more subtle ones. Subtle principles affect other principles in day to day life. Ayurveda recognizes that sometimes subtle energies or functions of consciousness can sometimes play an extremely important role in how we become diseased. This explanation of samkhya is very much connected to explanation of Shakti (Universal Divine Energy or Source – Female), and Shaktiman (Divine Source – Male), as given in Vedanta. (Ancient Scriptural Texts). Shakti means power or energy. Shaktiman is the wielder of power.

According to Vedanta, There is only ONE powerful personality (the source of all creation). That personality is referred to as ‘PURUSHA’ in Samkhya Philosophy. Creation begins from the perspective of Samkhya philosophy with two concepts. First, is the concept of Purusha – who is the enjoyer or the predominator, and, the second, is the concept of ‘Prakrati’ or Matter. When we say in Samkhya philosophy, we are talking about matter in its original, balanced, equipoised state. When the Purusha glances over Matter in its original state, life is injected into it.

We can say, it is something like – God has breathed life into the universe, as described in the Bible. So, Purusha is the energetic, the wielder of power. And, Prakrati is ENERGY. Energy in the form of potential of all other matters and forms of energy. It transforms into other forms of life. From Vedanta we also understand that this ENERGY also exists as ‘self’.
Understanding the SELF is critical in order to understand...that which makes a distinction between living body and a dead body. In a dead body, all functions of bodily actions have stopped. There is no breathing, no brain activity, no heart activity. We say, someone has died. But, according to Vedanta and Samkhya, it is the presence of the self within the body that makes the distinction between living and self. So, Samkhya will say SELF has left the physical body, instead of someone has died. Nonetheless, We are not talking about body and mind, and self conception. These are described separately.

When we talk about SELF we mean SOUL, JIVATMA in sanskrit, that spiritual self that exists within all coverings like mind, intellect, ego and gross and subtle forms of body.

An Overview of Universe as viewed by Samkhya

In Samkhya there are two main principles – Purusha and Prakrati. Samkhya is a way of understanding the universe through the principles of subtle energies and their interactions defined in ancient text called ‘Bhagavad Purana’, which is related to the understanding of shakti (power) and shaktiman (powerful). In Samkhya philosophy, there is only one Source – A Male Divine, who is equivalent to Purusha (predominator or wielder of energies), who energizes the Prakruti which is equivalent to shakti. As Purusha breathes life into nature, the energy or nature manifests as jivatma (soul) in the Ayurvedic sense of “self” – all these other elements are created. The principle of Pancha Mahabhoota is closely related to the Samkhya philosophy as it develops it’s system on the 5 basic subtle elements (space, air, fire, water, earth) that together compose the life energy (prakruti).
Ayurveda defines 3 types of prakruti (Doṣas) based on the 5 basic elements: Kapha (Water and Earth), and Pitta (Fire), Vata (Air and Space/Ether). We are born with a combination of these 3 elements and our constitution (prakruti) is determined by the dominant element(s). When the three Doṣas are balanced, a human is considered to be in a perfect health in the Ayurvedic health science. When, anyone of these elements is imbalanced and/or impaired, it is believed that it creates disease.

These three elements create the seven Dhātus (Sapta Dhātu) that give shape to the body. Everyone is born with a combination of the three elements. However, one element is dominant and is called the constitution or Prakrati of the person, and one’s constitution determines the primary cause of one’s ailments.

We are controlled by three modes of nature, called Mode of Goodness (Sattva), Mode of Ignorance (Rajas) and Mode of Passion (Tamas). Every action or karma is governed by these three modes.

According to Ayurveda, these seven Dhātus are chyle, blood, flesh, fat, bone, marrow, and semen. Kapha (earth/water) controls blood, fat, marrow and semen. Vata (air) controls bones and joints. Pitta (fire) controls the ‘Agni’ that aids digestion. Vata or Vāyu (air) is responsible of the entire movement of these Dhātus.
Samkhya Philosophy in Review

Ayurveda is based on one of the six philosophical perspectives called Samkhya. Samkhya theory was given by Sage Kapila. This theory gives an explanation on the origin of universe and life. It offers a model of evolving consciousness from non-material to material. It regards the universe to be consisting of two realities: Purusha (consciousness) and Prakriti (unmanifested/matter). Both the “Purusha” and “Prakriti” are completely distinct, yet, connected. Purusha is uncreated, absolute, pure and passive witness to creation whereas Prakriti is dynamic, creates, impure and which is the first principle of manifestation. It contains 3 gunas-Rajas, Tamas, Sattva.

Prakriti is the force that works like automation. All the cause and effect are already latent in it. When the Purusha and Prakriti comes in contact with each other, the equilibrium of the 3 gunas break which results in manifestation of Mahad (Buddhi) which further manifests into Ahamkara (Ego) which activates the trigunas. The action of Rajas on Tamas results in, 5 tanmantras and pancha mahabhutas. These mahabhutas result in the tridoshas of Vata, Pitta and Kapha. The action of Rajas on Sattva gives rise to 5 knowledge acquiring senses and the five working senses.