

# The Self And Suffering: Therapeutic Perspectives From Indian Knowledge Systems.

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## Abstract:

Indian philosophical and religious traditions view suffering (*duhkha*) as an intrinsic aspect of existence. The path to liberation (*moksha*) lies in transcending the karmic cycle, freeing oneself from the bonds of suffering and attaining ultimate peace (*sukha*). *Duhkha* signifies inner turmoil and pain, whereas *sukha* reflects ease, balance and well-being. Studies comparing Indian and Western perspectives often highlight significant differences in how suffering is understood, experienced and addressed. Western perspectives, particularly within medicine and psychology, tend to focus on identifying and mitigating suffering, mostly emphasizing the role of individual factors and medical interventions. The art and science of Yoga enables the stilling of mental fluctuations through deep non-attachment and transcendence. In this deep quietude of the inner mind, the eternal self (*purusha*) is realised. Life is then seen as an expression of the greater Self, and in that awakening, we transcend all suffering. This is the ultimate yogic solution to suffering, the discovery of eternal peace and bliss. Understanding these concepts within ancient Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) can help clinicians gain a deeper insight into the inner world of their patients. Healthcare professionals worldwide need to realise that “suffering” in the context of IKS is part of a “larger life context” especially for people of Indian origin. Adoption of culturally appropriate methods enhances effectiveness and creates a holistic approach to therapy. Culture should not be viewed as a rigid barrier or source of division. Human suffering is universal, and clinical psychiatry should focus on shared experiences rather than differences.

**Keywords:** indian knowledge systems, suffering, self-concept, sanathana dharma, buddhism, mental health, Indian psychology.

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## INTRODUCTION:

Since the dawn of civilization, humanity has sought ways to overcome sorrow and discover enduring peace and happiness. As defined by Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus (Cambridge University Press, 2025) suffering is “the experience of physical or mental pain.”

### **Concept of self : western thought and indian wisdom.**

William James distinguished between the 'me' (self as object) and the 'I' (self as subject and experiencer). Descartes, centuries earlier, employed radical doubt to question all mental phenomena and arrived at cogito ergo sum : "I think, therefore I am." He identified the self as the thinking entity (res cogitans), distinct from the material world (res extensa), establishing consciousness as the foundation of existence. (James ,1980 ; Newman , 2019). However, millennia before Descartes, Indian rishis sought to understand the nature of reality and consciousness through a method of negation known as neti neti (not this, not this). By systematically rejecting all that could be perceived, including thoughts and emotions, they arrived at the concept of an ultimate witnessing self (sakshi). Unlike Descartes, who equated thinking with being, the rishis recognized that even thoughts could be observed, implying the presence of an awareness beyond them. This pure consciousness, termed atman, was considered the true self ; unchanging and distinct from mental activities such as cognition, perception and volition. While Descartes located identity within the act of thinking, Indian philosophy posited an observer beyond thought, which remains as the ultimate experiencer of all mental and sensory processes. In ancient India, this quest gave rise to profound spiritual traditions, philosophical insights and yogic practices. The sages and seers of India explored the nature of suffering and the path to liberation through self-realization. Adi Shankaracharya, the propounder of Advaita Vedanta, emphasized upon 'param sukhaprapthih dukkhanivrittih' implying that the ultimate goal of human life is the attainment of eternal peace through the dissolution of suffering and ignorance. (Gambhirananda , 2006) In Indian philosophical and religious traditions, suffering (duhkha) is viewed as an intrinsic aspect of existence, arising from karma and attachment to the impermanent. The path to liberation (moksha) lies in transcending this cycle, freeing oneself from the bonds of suffering and attaining ultimate peace (sukha). Both Sanatana Dharma and Buddhism share key concepts regarding the mind, self and suffering; shaping their followers' worldview. While Sanatana Dharma recognizes atman as the eternal self, Buddhism rejects a permanent self (anatma), considering existence transient and illusory. While Hindu sages found atman, Buddhists discovered shunyata - emptiness or non-self. Though rooted in Sanatana Dharma, dukkha holds greater prominence in Buddhism, where suffering is a central truth. Dukkha signifies inner turmoil and pain, while sukha reflects ease, balance and well-being. At the heart of the Buddha's teachings lies the timeless truth expressed in the phrase 'sarvam dukkham' that all conditioned existence is inherently suffering. (Radhakrishnan , 1923 ; Bhikkhu Bodhi , 2005)

Hindu sages and philosophers posited a subjective reality which is knower, experiencer or Self apart from mind. In the Buddhist tradition, the mind is the Ultimate and they do not propose any substantive reality. Thus, the concept of shunyata emerges from the Kshanika vada or momentary awareness. Despite these differences, both start with the ways and means to come out of dukkham and thus dukkha nidhanam is prominent in these traditions. Maharishi Patanjali's Yoga Darsana , in line with the Upanishadic conclusion, asserts that the chit (pure consciousness) and chitta (experience of consciousness at the individual level) are distinct from the body, senses, mind and even buddhi (intellect). It emphasizes transcending the multi-dimensional gross as well as subtle layers of existence to realize the inner spiritual essence, the true self beyond all physical and mental identifications. To this extent, he states clearly that all manifestation is realised as being tinged with suffering when one's higher intellect awakens. He further elaborates that one should attempt to prevent the unmanifest suffering by removing the root cause which is avidya. This can be well understood from the following three sutras : (Bhavanani , 2011; Iyengar , 2005)

dukhameva sarvam vivekinahah (PYS 2:15)

heyam dukhamanagatam (PYS 2:16)

tasya heturavidya (PYS 2:24)

### **UNDERSTANDING SUFFERING : Indian versus Western Perspective.**

Studies comparing Indian and Western perspectives on suffering often highlight significant differences in how suffering is understood, experienced and addressed (Table 1). In Indian traditions, suffering is often viewed as an inherent part of the human condition, tied to karma and the cycle of rebirth. Western perspectives, particularly within medicine and psychology, tend to focus on identifying and mitigating suffering, often emphasizing the role of individual factors and medical interventions.

**Table 1: Key Differences and Points of Comparison:**

| Key Aspect                       | Indian Perspectives                                                                                                                                      | Western Perspectives                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Understanding of Suffering       | Suffering (duhkha) is a universal experience arising from ignorance, attachment and desire. Liberation (moksha/nirvana) is achieved by overcoming these. | Suffering results from specific causes like illness, trauma or psychological distress. Focus is on treating these causes through therapy, medicine or lifestyle. |
| Role of Karma and Rebirth        | Suffering is a result of past karma. Ethical conduct and positive mental states reduce future suffering and aid spiritual progress across lifetimes.     | Emphasis is on the immediate and future consequences of actions. Concepts like karma and rebirth are less central or absent.                                     |
| Focus on Self and Identity       | Suffering stems from ignorance of the true Self (Atman). The illusion of separateness causes distress; realization leads to liberation.                  | Focus is on individual identity and personal experiences. Emphasis is on how suffering impacts personal well-being and functioning.                              |
| Role of Emotions and Mind        | Emotions are both obstacles and tools for liberation. Suffering arises from mental attachments. Mindfulness and detachment are key.                      | Emotions are seen as psychological processes. Therapy aims to manage emotional responses and improve mental health.                                              |
| Coping Mechanisms and Strategies | Spiritual practices like yoga including meditation, devotion, self-inquiry and cultivating detachment & virtues are primary tools.                       | Coping involves psychotherapy (e.g. CBT), medication, mindfulness-based practices and lifestyle changes.                                                         |
| Implications for Mental Health   | Mental health is understood in terms of spiritual imbalances, karma and attachment. Spiritual growth is essential for healing.                           | Mental health is treated using clinical diagnoses and therapeutic models. Increasing emphasis on cultural sensitivity and holistic care.                         |

**Understanding suffering in the ancient indian context:**

**Tapatraya:**

According to the Vedic teachings, duhkha (suffering) is threefold:

- Adhyatmika Duhkha - Suffering caused by internal factors, such as physical illness or mental distress.
- Adhibhautika Duhkha - Suffering caused by external factors, such as harm from other beings or environmental conditions.
- Adhidaivika Duhkha - Suffering caused by cosmic forces, such as natural disasters or fate.

**Sariratraya:**

The Mandukya Upanishad describes the body as consisting of three layers: the physical body (sthula sarira) which includes the external form and its functions; the subtle body (sukshma sarira) encompassing emotions, thoughts and rational faculties; and the causal body (karana sarira) associated with deep contentment, bliss and the seed of consciousness. While the gross and subtle bodies experience pain and sorrow, the causal body encompasses the quiet radiance of bliss. (Nikhilananda , 2007)

**AVASTHATRAYA:**

The Mandukya Upanishad describes three primary states of consciousness, and a fourth :

- Jagrat (waking state): In this state, the individual identifies with the physical body, perceiving a structured world through space and time. The waking body has an inside and an outside; and the mind is directed outward through the senses.
- Svapna (dreaming state): Here, the mind withdraws from the external world and creates its own inner reality through memories, desires and impressions. The dreaming mind has an inside, but no external world; it is a reality conceived within.
- Susupti (deep sleep state): In deep sleep, both waking and dream experiences dissolve. There is no perception of the body, mind or world. Yet, a subtle awareness remains; a content-less consciousness that does not change. It has no inside, no outside and does not come or go. It is present as the silent witness to all experiences.
- Turiya (fourth state): This changeless background of deep sleep points toward turiya, the 'Fourth' - not merely another state, but the eternal, underlying consciousness that illumines all three. Turiya is the ever-present Self; unchanging, untouched by suffering. In this pure awareness, free from all identification, remains only the stillness of **sat chit ananda** - existence, consciousness and bliss. (Nikhilananda , 2007)

#### **Atma anatma vichara (pancha kosha viveka) :**

The Taittiriya Upanishad employs the technique of atma-anatma-vichara (self /non-self) to explain the multidimensional nature of human existence. It presents the concept of Panchakosha - five interwoven concentric sheaths - from the gross physical body to the subtlest experience of bliss, illustrating how the Self is veiled by layers of experience.

- Annamaya Kosha - The physical sheath, comprising the musculoskeletal system; is the outermost layer of the body.
- Pranamaya Kosha - The vital energy sheath, responsible for physiological functions; includes the pancha prana and the karmendriya.
- Manomaya Kosha - The mental sheath, responsible for psychological functions; includes the antahkarana and the jnanendriya.
- Vijnanamaya Kosha - The intellectual sheath, responsible for reasoning, judgment and discernment; includes buddhi and the ichha - kriya - jnana shakti.
- Anandamaya Kosha - The bliss sheath, where the innate joy of the Self is experienced without awareness, is the threshold where ignorance of the true Self exists, yet specific identification with the other kosha has not occurred. Like an empty container, it holds potential for identification but remains free from duality, allowing the bliss aspect of our true nature to manifest subtly. This is the interface between the microcosm and macrocosm, the subtlest link between us as an individual (asmita) and the cosmos.

While the four grosser kosha : the physical, vital, mental and intellectual sheaths; are subject to pain, turmoil and impermanence, it is within the anandamaya kosha, the innermost veil of bliss, that one glimpses the true Self. Here, beyond suffering, the Self is revealed as **sat chit ananda** - pure being, radiant awareness and infinite joy. (Radhakrishnan , 1953 ; Mishra , 2019 ; Gambhirananda , 2004)

#### **ANTAHKARANA: the inner instrument**

The Mandukya Upanishad describes the Antahkarana Chatusthaya (inner instrument) as consisting of four parts:

- Chitta - The storehouse of samskara (impressions).
- Buddhi - The decision-making faculty.
- Ahamkara - The ego or sense of individuality.
- Manas - The synthesizing faculty that processes sensory information.

Chitta is the subconscious and unconscious mind, where all past experiences leave impressions called samskara. These impressions give rise to vasana, or deep-seated tendencies and desires, which drive karma or action. Each action creates new impressions, feeding back into chitta and continuing the cycle. This loop - chitta → samskara → vasana → karma shapes one's behaviour and destiny over lifetimes. The goal of spiritual practice is to silence and overcome the fluctuations of chitta, dissolve samskara and transcend Vasana; breaking the cycle of karma and ultimately attaining moksha - liberation from conditioned existence. (Radhakrishnan , 1953 ; Mishra , 2019 ; Gambhirananda , 2004)

### **Ayurveda:**

Ayurveda identifies Prajnaparadha - "transgression against one's own conscience" as the root cause of suffering, leading to imbalance in body, mind and spirit. Prajna is transcendental or true wisdom, the innate ability to discern what is true, right and lasting. It reflects deep insight, a wise outlook and the cumulative learning that guides right action. In Ayurveda, Prajna has three key components:

- Dhi - the faculty of learning and understanding.
- Dhriti - the power of retention and restraint.
- Smriti - the capacity to recall or memory.

When Dhi, Dhriti and Smriti function in harmony, they sustain Swasthya - a state of complete health and well-being. However, when these faculties are impaired - physically, mentally or morally, it leads to Prajnaparadha (the mistake of the intellect), which disrupts the natural balance and becomes a root cause of suffering and disease. (Sreekanth et al., 2018).

### **Abhidhamma: The Psychological Roots Of Suffering**

It was Buddha's view that all physical and psychological aspects of a human being are governed by the universal causal laws of nature, irrespective of race, colour, caste or gender. At the most fundamental level, every living being can be reduced to a succession of transient conscious (mental) 'internal' and physical states. The relentless interaction between internal and physical states leads to the panorama of events associated with life. We suffer when unpleasant feelings pervade our conscious internal states and when we experience unpleasant states of 'body consciousness associated with pain'. The emotional formations or sankharas which arise when we suffer, are aversion, hatred, jealousy, avarice, fear, worry and grief. The fact that these states will arise some time in our lives is affirmed by the **First Noble Truth** which confirms the reality of suffering. However, the origin of suffering is not identified with this list of emotional formations but rather, is held to arise from craving, greed, lust, pride and wrong view. This is because this set of formations (rooted in craving) are associated with either pleasant or neutral feelings (vedana), in contrast to those rooted in aversion which invariably involve unpleasant sensations. It is our craving for pleasant feelings and sensations which lure us into the domain of suffering. This psychological fact is enshrined in the **Second** and **Third Noble Truths** which identifies desire/craving to be the origin of suffering. The sankharas of craving on one hand and those of aversion on the other are mutually exclusive, yet they both co-occur with delusion, the chronic misapprehension of reality. The psychological roots of craving, aversion and delusion and their associated mental factors are classed as akusala (unskillful) internal states involved in or leading to human pain and suffering. The **Fourth Noble Truth** describes the path to be followed to eradicate all forms akusala consciousness and mental contents from the human psychological system. It is also notable that restlessness, sloth, torpor and moral depravity can only arise in akusala, internal states.

It is true that frustration of craving and our cherished desires can lead to suffering and pain. It was Shakyamuni's great discovery that every instantiated internal state has a causally related 'resultant', which will subsequently arise in time. Thus, even though states rooted in craving may initially involve pleasant feelings and sensations, yet eventually they will causally give rise to painful sensations in the body (body consciousness associated with pain). This is a law of nature (karma) and will act impersonally and relentlessly no matter how capable, intelligent, religious and privileged we may be or believe ourselves to be. This in brief is the psychological analysis of suffering as found in the Abhidhamma attributed to Shakyamuni. (Banerjee, 2011).

### **Bhagavad gita:**

**shaknotihaiva yah sodhum prak sharira vimokshanat**

**kama-krodhodbhavam vegam sa yuktah sa sukhi narah (BG 5:23)**

"He who is able to withstand the impulse of desire and anger before giving up the body is a happy man."

The Bhagavad Gita, reveals that stress arises from the uncontrolled impulses of kama (desire) and krodha (anger). It is seen as a form of unrestrained psychological momentum - a mental speed that disrupts inner stability. When the mind is entangled in desires, it leads to frustration, agitation and emotional imbalance. This inner turbulence pulls one away from clarity and peace. In contrast, a truly blissful person is one who masters these impulses, maintaining calm amidst chaos and attaining lasting happiness.

**dhyayato vishayan pumsah sangas teshupajayate**

**sangat sanjayate kamah kamat krodho 'bhijayate**  
(BG 2.62)

**krodhad bhavati sammohah sammohat smriti-vibhramah**  
**smriti-bhranshad buddhi-nasho buddhi-nashat pranashyati**  
(BG 2.63)

When a person repeatedly thinks about sensory objects, a subtle psychological chain reaction is set into motion. This sloka from the Bhagavad Gita outlines this process with clarity: from contemplation arises attachment, from attachment comes desire, and when desire is obstructed, it gives rise to anger. Anger, in turn, leads to delusion, which clouds memory and erodes discrimination, ultimately leading to one's downfall. Even if one succeeds in fulfilling a desire, the mind quickly finds another object to latch onto, and the cycle begins anew. This ancient insight is not only philosophical but also deeply psychological, revealing how the mind can become entangled in its own patterns. Thus, the constant swing between desire, fulfilment and frustration becomes a self-perpetuating cycle of suffering. (Sargeant , 2009).

**Patanjali yoga sutra (pys) :**

In the Yogasutra, Maharishi Patanjali presents various tools and practices aimed at *Atyantika Duhkha Nivritti* - the complete cessation of suffering. To truly benefit from his teachings, we must first understand the nature and causation of suffering as he defines it:

• **Panchaklesha, Panchavritti, Shadripu :**

'**Klishnati iti kleshah**' - that which causes suffering is called klesha. Accumulated klesha bind the sadhaka to suffering and rebirth, distorting chittavritti, turning every mental modification - *pramana, viparyaya, vikalpa* and *nidra* into either *klishta* (afflictive) or *aklishta* (non-afflictive).

*vrttayah pancatayyah klistaklista*

*pramanaviparyayavikalpanidrasmrtyayah* (PYS 1.5-6)

▪ **Klishta vritti:**

*avidyasmitaragadvesabhinivesah klesha* (PYS 2:3)

When vritti arises from *avidya* (ignorance), *asmita* (egoism), *raga* (attachment), *dvesha* (aversion) or *abhinivesha* (fear of death); they become the field for *karmashaya* (vehicles of action) and are classified as *klishta vritti*.

When *chitta* encounters external objects (*vishaya*), the *samskara* linked to these objects activate, generating various thoughts. These thoughts propel the individual to react towards the *vishaya*. If these thoughts fail to translate into external actions, they give rise to negative emotions such as *kama, krodha, lobha, moha, mada* and *matsarya*: the *shadripu / arishadvarga*. (PYS 2:34)

▪ **Aklishta vritti:**

When vritti are free from klesha, they are called *aklishta vritti* (non-afflictive). Rooted in discriminative knowledge of *purusha* (soul) and *prakriti* (nature), they lead the person towards *sukha*.

*drastrdrsyayoh samyogo heyahetuh* (PYS 2:16 - 17)

The causation of suffering lies in the mistaken identification of pure consciousness (*drashta/Atma*) with the ever-changing *prakriti* (*drishya*), leading to misidentification and *duhkha*.

*tasya hetuh avidya* (PYS 2:24)

This mistaken union is rooted in *avidya* (ignorance), the root of all klesha.

*anityasuciduhkhanatmasu nityasucisukhatmakhyatiravidya* (PYS 2:5)

Mistaking the

- *anitya as nitya* : transient for the permanent,
- *ashuchi as suchi* : the impure for the pure,
- *duhkha as sukha* : pain for pleasure, and
- *anatma as atma* : that which is not the self for the self,

all this is called lack of spiritual knowledge, *avidya*.

These four dimensions of *avidya* bind the *Atma* to the cycle of happiness and sorrow, life and death. In contrast, recognizing the non-eternal, impure, painful and non-*Atma* entities in their true nature is *vidya*. True knowledge dispels *avidya*, leading the *Atma* to *param sukha - moksha*.

▪ **Progressive Stages of the Panchaklesha:**

avidyaksetramuttarasesam prasuptatanuvicchinnodaranaam (PYS2:4)

The pancha klesha exist in four progressive states of manifestation:

- Prasupta (dormant) - Latent and inactive, yet present as a potential. Klesha in this state remain unexpressed until triggered by favourable conditions.
- Tanu (attenuated) - Weakened through spiritual practices, they exist subtly but no longer influence behaviour under normal circumstances.
- Vichchinna (manifest) - Temporarily suppressed by a stronger klesha, but capable of re-emerging when the dominant affliction fades.
- Udara (overpowering) - Intensely operative, influencing thoughts, emotions and actions, creating karmic consequences.

• **Causes of Duhkha:**

parinatapata samskara duhkhaih gunavrtti virodhat ca duhkhameva  
sarvam vivekinah (PYS 2:15)

While analysing the cause of duhkha (suffering), Maharshi Patanjali states that it arises due to:

- Parinama - Suffering caused by change or transformation, such as aging or loss.
- Tapa - Suffering caused by internal conflict, self-inflicted pain, or mental agitation.
- Samskara - Suffering caused by latent impressions or past karmic residues.

He emphasizes that even pleasurable experiences eventually lead to suffering due to their transient nature. The discerning one realizes that all life involves suffering and one must transcend the qualities of nature, enduring the fire of inner transformation to rise above worldly sorrow.

heyam duhkham anagamam (PYS 2:16)

While past and present suffering cannot be changed, future suffering (anagamam duhkham) can be prevented.

• **Antaraya and Chitta Vikshepa:**

vyadhi styana samsaya pramada alasya avirati bhrantidarsana  
alabdhabhumikatva anavasthitatvani cittavikshepahte antarayah

dukha daurmanasya angamejayatva svasaprasvasah viksepa sahabhuvah (PYS 1:30 - 31)

Maharishi Patanjali identifies Vyadhi (disease) as one of the nine major obstacles (antaraya) to Yoga or integrative oneness. He describes symptoms like painful suffering (duhkha), dejection (daurmanasya), tremors (angamejayatva) and irregular breathing (svasa-prasvasa) as manifestations of mental disturbance. These are not just physical or emotional issues but indicators of a deeper spiritual disintegration caused by fluctuations in the mind (citta-viksepa). At the core of this framework is the doctrine of panca-klesha. These psychological afflictions perpetuate suffering : from immediate issues like disease to the larger cycle of birth and rebirth. In Patanjali's vision, disease is not merely a physical event but a signal of deeper misalignment. Yoga offers not only relief from lower-level suffering like illness, but also a path to transcend the ultimate suffering - samsara, the cycle of birth and death, through disciplined inner transformation. ( Bhavanani , 2020).

**SAMKHYA, YOGA and VEDANTA: A Unified Vision of Indian Thought.**

Samkhya, founded by Sage Kapila, offers a rational and systematic theory of the material universe's evolution, accepted by other Vedic schools and Ayurveda. Kapila acknowledged Vedic authority and classified reality into 25 categories; 24 belong to the Seen (Drishya) and the 25th, Purusa, is the Seer (Drastha). The Seen, governed by the interplay of the Triguna - Sattva (balance), Rajas (activity) and Tamas (inertia); is constantly changing. Through inquiry (Jijnasa) and realization, one understands the distinction between the Seer and the Seen, leading to detachment (Vairagya) and freedom from sorrow.

Yogadarsana, codified by Maharishi Patanjali, builds on Samkhya's metaphysics but adds Ishwara Pranidhana : surrender to a higher consciousness (Ishwara), as a means to liberation. While accepting the Seer and the Seen, Yoga emphasizes structured practices for self-discipline, involving the cultivation of body, mind and emotions to reach higher states of awareness.

Vedanta, attributed to the synthesis of ideas by Ved Vyasa in the Brahma Sutra, explores the metaphysical ideas of the Seer, the Seen and the Divine from a scriptural standpoint. Unlike Samkhya and Yoga, Vedanta relies less on practice and more on intellectual inquiry:

- Sravana (listening),
- Manana (contemplation), and
- Nidhidhyasana (realization).

Advaita Vedanta, the most prominent school, upholds the non-duality of Atman and Brahman. Vedantists align with yogic concepts like the **seven planes of consciousness** and the **subconscious**, though they interpret Manas more broadly. Jnana Yoga, with its depth of insight, can complement the Hatha Yogi's physical focus, which may lack philosophical depth. They value inner meditation but often overlook the bodily disciplines of Hatha Yoga. Though having some subtle differences; Samkhya, Yoga and Vedanta together form an integrated path of Indian spiritual practice (Table 2).

**Table 2: Comparison of Yoga, Vedanta, and Samkhya Philosophies:** (Bhavanani, 2010)

| YOGA                                                                                                                             | VEDANTA                                 | SAMKHYA                                                               |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Paramatman<br>(Self-Existing)                                                                                                    | Brahman (Being)                         | Purusha                                                               |
| Mahatattva<br>(Mighty That-Ness)                                                                                                 | Sacchidananda                           | Mulaprakriti<br>Prakriti                                              |
| Chit<br>(Undivided Consciousness)                                                                                                | Chit                                    | Mahat                                                                 |
| Ahamkara<br>(Pure I / Impure I)                                                                                                  | (Vedanta puts Ahamkara below<br>Buddhi) | Ahamkara                                                              |
| Buddhi<br>(With Viveka, the Power of<br>Discernment)<br>Iccha Shakti - Will<br>Jnana Shakti - Knowledge<br>Kriya Shakti - Action | Buddhi                                  | Buddhi                                                                |
|                                                                                                                                  | Ahamkara                                | Pancha Tanmatras<br>(Subtle senses)                                   |
| Manas<br>(Seven planes of Consciousness)                                                                                         | Manas                                   | Manas                                                                 |
|                                                                                                                                  |                                         | Pancha Jnanendriya<br>(Five senses of information)                    |
|                                                                                                                                  |                                         | Pancha Karmendriya<br>(Five senses of action)                         |
| Chitta<br>(Sub-Consciousness)                                                                                                    | Chitta                                  | Chitta                                                                |
| Pancha Tanmatra<br>(Subtle senses)                                                                                               | Senses                                  | Senses                                                                |
| Pancha Jnanendriya<br>(Five senses of information)                                                                               |                                         | Pancha Maha Bhuta<br>(Five elements making up the<br>world of matter) |
| Pancha Karmendriya<br>(Five senses of action)                                                                                    |                                         |                                                                       |
| Pancha Maha Bhuta<br>(Five elements making up the<br>world of matter)                                                            | The world of matter                     | The world of matter<br>(Earth)                                        |

Yoga employs time-tested bodily practices that engage breath, senses and the mind to progress from gross to subtle states of awareness, following traditional lineages. In contrast, Vedanta and Samkhya emphasize ascent through intellect (Manas and Buddhi), often bypassing the embodied experiences foundational in Yoga. In ancient times, the disciplined Vedic lifestyle naturally integrated elements akin to Hatha Yoga, making formal practice less necessary. However, in today's chaotic sense-driven world, such structures are lacking; prompting many modern Vedantins to adopt Yogic methods in their teachings and lifestyles.

#### **Yogic approaches to overcome dukkha:**

##### **• KAIVALYA : The Final Liberation from dukkha**

tad abhavat samyoga abhavah hanam tad drseh kaivalyam (PYS 2:25)

When avidya (ignorance) is removed through viveka (discerning knowledge), the seer stands apart, in pure awareness, untouched and free. This clarity is emancipation - freedom from bondage, beyond all suffering.

##### **• SAMADHI: an antidote to klesha**

samadhi bhavana arthah klesha tanukarnarthashca (PYS 2:2)

Maharishi Patanjali states that Samadhi - the state of self-realization, is the solution to reduce klesha. This realization is not a glorification of the personal ego but the uncovering of the Ishwara, the pure, unconditioned consciousness that exists beyond the bounds of the triguna, time, space and causation (karma).

The Sanskrit word Samadhi comes from the root words sam (together, balance), a (towards) and dha (to place); meaning 'to place or bring together in harmony.' Symbolically, sama also means balance or pleasantness and dhi refers to the intellect or mind. Thus, Samadhi can be beautifully understood as a serene and equanimous state where all aspects of the mind (adhi) are in perfect harmony - an inner stillness where consciousness rests in its natural wholeness.

##### **• VIVEKA as an antidote to AVIDYA:**

viveka khyatih avi-plava hana upayah (PYS 2: 26)

It is through the steady and conscious application of the discerning intellect (viveka) that ignorance is dissolved.

##### **• ABHYASA and VAIRAGYA as an antidote to CHITTAVRITTI:**

yoga anga anusthanat asuddhi ksaye jnana diptih aviveka khyateh (PYS 2:28)

Through steadfast practice and embodiment of the limbs of yoga, the inner impurities - mental, emotional and karmic are gradually cleansed. As the veil of ignorance lifts, the radiant light of intuitive wisdom (prajna) begins to shine forth. This illumination nurtures profound clarity and refined discernment (viveka), enabling the practitioner to perceive reality as it truly is. This is the true essence of yoga: a journey of persistent practice (abhyasa) towards inner purification, wisdom and ultimate freedom.

abhyasa vairagyabhyam tannirodhah (PYS 1:12)

Abhyasa (sustained practice) and vairagya (dispassion or non-attachment) are the two foundational pillars for attaining mental stillness and spiritual evolution. While the former refers to consistent, dedicated inner effort cultivating focus, discipline and steadiness of the mind; the latter signifies the mindful and conscious choice towards letting go of cravings, aversions and attachments to worldly experiences. Together, these two form the essential means to still the fluctuations of consciousness. They help nurture a dispassionate, non-attached and objective meta-cognitive awareness; the very perspective that frees us from suffering and leads toward self-realization. (Bhavanani , 2011; Satish , 2014; Iyengar , 2005; Bhavanani , 2020)

#### **Therapeutic implications :**

Understanding these concepts within ancient Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) can help clinicians build better rapport and gain deeper insight into their patients' inner world. This article explores the core cultural and spiritual beliefs of these two faiths, aiming to enhance clinicians' knowledge to support more effective therapeutic engagement especially with Indian /Asian patients.

It is imperative that the physicians and mental health personnel world over realise that "suffering" in the context of IKS is part of a 'larger life context' for people of Indian origin. They need to tap the source of these philosophical knowledge systems and adopt culturally appropriate methods to enhance the effectiveness of their therapy. In this section, we provide a brief glimpse of important theoretical concepts to help clinicians

understand the context of “suffering” from a perspective of the patients “inner world”. This enables a holistic approach to therapy that will be more effective and long lasting.

#### **Application of iks perspectives in therapy:**

Studies indicate that many individuals with mental illness desire to explore religious beliefs and spirituality as part of their therapy (Moreira-Almeida , 2014; Koenig , 2020). However, integrating spirituality into clinical practice raises ethical and practical challenges, as discussed in a 2008 Psychiatric Bulletin series (Hollins , 2008 ; Koenig , 2008 ; Poole , 2008). It is crucial that psychiatrists refrain from imposing any belief system - whether religious, ideological, political or moral on their patients. Concerns about influencing vulnerable patients and crossing professional boundaries are valid (Poole 2011), and many health care professionals feel uncomfortable discussing such deeply personal matters (Best 2016).

A central goal of clinical medicine, including psychiatry, is to alleviate suffering. Understanding a patient's perspective on their suffering and the meaning they assign to it can strengthen the therapeutic relationship. Patients primarily want to feel understood, particularly when it comes to personal and spiritual aspects of their lives. As Cassel (1982) noted, if physicians fail to comprehend the nature of suffering, their interventions, while technically adequate, may not only fail to alleviate distress but could inadvertently become a source of further suffering.

Studies show that while many patients want to discuss spirituality with their doctors, clinicians often neglect to ask about it (Islam , 2021; Rosmarin 2015; Best 2016). Torrey (1986) compared psychiatrists with indigenous healers and identified four key elements that aid in healing:

- a shared worldview that provides meaning to the diagnosis,
- the personal qualities of the clinician,
- positive patient expectations (e.g. hope, faith, placebo) and
- the patient feeling empowered.

To bridge cultural gaps, clinicians should understand the patient's worldview to create a shared sense of meaning. This does not mean agreeing with or supporting potentially delusional beliefs, but rather understanding how the patient interprets their suffering. Medical curricula in the UK have begun incorporating spirituality training (Neely 2008; Culatto 2015), which can complement existing medical education (Calman 2008). The Royal College of Psychiatrists has published a position statement on spirituality and psychiatry, offering guidance for clinicians and trainees (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2013). Additional guidelines are available from other organizations (Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists 2018; Koenig 2020), emphasizing the importance of understanding spirituality and religion in relation to mental disorders' aetiology, diagnosis, and treatment. Using terms like *manas* to describe emotions or *buddhi* to discuss cognitive functions can provide a deeper connection to patients' understanding of their afflictions, offering insight beyond what traditional medical terminology may allow. These concepts, rooted in cultural and spiritual contexts, may resonate more meaningfully with patients, facilitating better communication and empathy in the therapeutic process. Culture should not be viewed as a rigid barrier or source of division. Human suffering is universal, and clinical psychiatry should focus on shared experiences rather than differences. Emphasizing "difference" rather than "universality" can hinder learning and create resistance to engaging in important discussions (Singh , 2022; Kai 1999).

#### **CONCLUSION : Para Vidya and Aparā Vidya**

All limbs of Yoga support the goal of *chitta vritti nirodha* (PYS 1:2) the stilling of mental fluctuations that cause illusion and distraction. In a quiet mind, like a clear mirror, the *Purusha* is reflected instead of mental noise. This state requires deep detachment and transcendence of ego and mind. *Avidya* is not merely the absence of knowledge, but a distorted or lower form of knowing that obscures true understanding which arises from the outward-turning mind; fragmented, superficial and shaped by desire, sensory input, bodily identification and karmic conditioning. It is knowledge rooted in appearances and duality, tied to time and space. This false knowledge veils the higher truth of the Self and is the fundamental cause of suffering. What we truly lack is **existential knowledge** - direct insight

into our inner being and eternal reality. This higher awareness is vidya, while the limited, externally driven understanding we rely on is avidya.

The scriptures identify it as Para Vidya and Aparā Vidya.

dveidyē veditavye iti ha sma yadbrahmadevā vadanti para caivapara ca  
tatrapara rgvedo yajurvedah samavedo'tharvavedah siksa kalpo vyakaranam  
niruktam chando jyotismiti |atha para yaya tadaksaramadhigamyate  
(MUNDAKA UPANISHAD 1.1.4 - 5)

nayamatma pravacanena labhyo na medhaya na bahuna srutena  
yamevaisa vrnute tena labhyastasyaisa atma vivrnute tanum svam

(MUNDAKA UPANISHAD 3.2.3)

It's important to recognize that even science and intellectual knowledge - rooted in name, form and number; and directed outwardly - constitute a form of avidya. Though valuable within their scope, they remain limited and can be misleading when mistaken for ultimate truth. This knowledge operates within the realm of appearances and concepts, unable to access the essence that lies beyond them. True vidya arises only when we go beyond conceptual thought and perceive the Self directly. While it helps us function in the material world, it cannot reveal the deeper spiritual truth of our existence. In fact, our outer knowledge is often an inner ignorance, which must be relinquished for true inner knowing to emerge.

Yet removing avidya is not easy. It requires a radical shift in our perception, a turning away from the outer world of becoming toward the inner realm of being. Only then can we access the timeless wisdom that ends suffering and reveals our true Self. This transformation requires dedicated Yoga sadhana, a dharmic way of life and a vision that seeks truth beyond surface appearances. All Vedic disciplines support this journey, but its essence lies in cultivating moment-to-moment awareness; where the mind's fluctuations are no longer mistaken for reality. The real practice of Yoga is a meditative inquiry into the essence of being. The Self is described by the Upanishads as the mind behind the mind, the speech behind speech, the prana behind prana, the seer behind the eye, the hearer behind the ear. It leads us from the outer layers of body and mind into the core energy of pure awareness. Through this inner realization, we come to see all of life as an expression of the greater Self, which holds the entire universe within it. In that awakening, we can release attachment to body, mind, ego and memory; and rest in the peace of our true Self. This is the ultimate yogic solution to suffering - the discovery of eternal peace and bliss. The entire art and science of Yoga, as outlined in the Yogasutra, serve to prepare us for this abiding in the "Seer", free from identification with the "Seen". (Rajagopalan, 2021).

tada drastuh swarupe avasthanam (PYS 1:3)

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