

## Vedanta Meets CBT: An Introductory Exploration for Cognitive-Behavioural Therapists

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### ABSTRACT

From the Indian context, Vedanta, the end of knowledge, has a positive connotation regarding mental health. CBT is an effective psychotherapy for anxiety and depression and its essential and its principles are based on Vedanta philosophy. Integrating Vedanta into CBT may make the latter more palatable and more effective. The following article aims to review research with a focus on applying Vedanta to CBT for depression and anxiety. However, this paper revealed that moderation of depressive and anxiety symptoms occurs earlier in treatment when CBT includes spirituality in its procedure although the modifying result will be the same at follow-up. Due to such literature, the authors give suggestions about implementing Vedantic principles and practices into CBT contingent on evidence that existing components of spirituality boost mental health. This paper is concerned with a particular type of spiritual integration into the practice of psychotherapy, namely, the practice of psychotherapy by the Vedanta. Analyzing it in a literal way, this branch of a psychological current mixed two different zones, four schools of therapy, and Vedanta within recognition of traditions, but with the formation of something completely different.

**Keywords:** *Vedanta, Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT), psychotherapy*

Human beings have done everything possible to look for ways that will help minimize their suffering throughout history. In different ages, the paradigms of the day have generated several spiritual and secular methods of dealing with the mind to palliate our emotional and physical pain. Whether it involves Freudian psychoanalysis, MRI scan of the brain from Gilbert (1989), Moyers (1993), and Woolfolk (1998), or any of the other forms within the modern human construct, the issue of suffering has led and continues to spur innovations in technology and/or philosophy. No matter how bad things are as humans, we always endeavour to make things easier, happier, and more bearable with sincere effort regardless of adversities or catastrophes. It is important to note that prescientific approaches are as old as several centuries; indeed, millions of people declare that Vedantic thought and practice have helped them enhance the quality of life and decrease the stress they come across. Other scientifically approved treatments are equally old, say CBT, but they offer us a unique advantage. Thus, we can create specific interventions that present us with a sobering and realistic way of thinking about the heck that people are in, as well as have a solution to

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Received: February 12, 2025; Revision Received: June 12, 2025; Accepted: June 15, 2025

the permanent problems. Besides, as more has been learned in evidence-based psychotherapies and traditional techniques of meditation, some aspects reveal the potentiality of integrating cognitive and behavioural approaches with meditation. The combination of pre-Newtonian wisdom paradigms with state-of-the-art knowledge-based cognitive and behaviourism models expands the range of options for applied psychological science. This paper will provide the CBT practitioners as well as the readers with an initial exposure to the Vedantic psychology as applied. We wish to express precisely what options are open to considering in applying Vedantic psychology and CBT together.

### *An Introduction to Vedanta:*

The term 'Upanishad' means 'to sit close by' and therefore this part of the Vedic knowledge was learned by the higher classes only, who sat near their teacher to learn more. Originally the term Vedanta referred to the Upanishads which are the final portion of the Veda. Today Vedanta means a philosophy based upon the Upanishads. Primitive Vedanta, which has been explained by the teacher of 7th century Shankara, inspires higher states of consciousness and liberation (Samadhi). It is believed that Vedant doctrines are apart from Upanishads, Brahmas-sutras, and Bhagavad-Gita. The Upanishads give us a goal in life, the Bhagavad Gita shows us how to get there and the Brahma Sutras are an essence of the Upanishads and give an understanding of life as it is. Other subsequent writings like the Yoga Vasistha, Ashtavakra Gita, and some other texts are considered Vedantic as the sayings of Neo-Vedantic contemporary gurus like Sri Ramana Maharshi, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo. In Vedanta, there is an explanation for how the universal absolute substratum of things, the unmanifest, interacts with the manifest part of life. Despite an apparent process of the transformation of Brahman or Brahman itself in one form or another, no actual change takes place. According to Vedanta, it is believed that Maya means that which does not exist and it has been recognized through the influence it exerts. Maya becomes the cause of change to the inert Brahman, which is, nevertheless, revealed as the universe. Vedanta also deals with the coarser forms of Maya known as Avidya or ignorance of Self-Atman in Marathi. Brahman is Ishwara, the person God (creator) due to the operation of Maya while Atman becomes Jiva due to the lack of knowledge. However, in Swami Vivekananda's words 'In the West, if a man doesn't believe in a God outside himself, he is an atheist, but according to Vedanta, a man who doesn't believe in himself is an atheist' Vedanta has got different schools. Shankara's philosophical education and overall thought process were dominated by Advaita Vedanta. The theories that belong to this school are oriented toward the correct understanding, right knowledge righteous interpretation of scriptures, and, basically, the direct perception. Thus, one who is comprehensively knowledgeable and especially with direct experience dispels ignorance and perceives the Oneness of Atman and Brahman and attains liberation. It is also assumed that the information that is expressed in Vedanta cannot be even perceived by the regular human mind due to its fallibility. Whereas Vedanta's goal is to attain superior forms of consciousness, consciousness has to be raised to even think about them. For example, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the exponent of Vedanta stated in graphic detail that 'Knowledge is structured in consciousness' one thus infers with heightened consciousness, heightened cognition of the essence of existence. Vedanta provides us with knowledge of the objective as well as how to reach it, such as (1) meditation, (2) discernment, (3) non-attachment, and (4) The Six Treasures: Measured discipline of the intellect, measured discipline of the sense organs, avoiding 'Securities' of love, patience, trust, and equanimity (5) Freedom from worldly desires. Finally, Vedanta declares that it cannot show us Brahman because that is what we are. It can only help to strip off the various layers of cover that obscure reality. We do not have liberty in the physical realm but are always free in the spiritual realm.

***An introduction to CBT:***

CBT is a type of psychotherapy for the application of behavioural and cognitive concepts and research together with behavioural therapy, cognitive therapy, and rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT developed from Albert Ellis and Aaron and Judy Beck's work). CBT's main assumption is that there is a connection between cognitive processes, including thoughts and beliefs, and emotions as well as behaviour. CBT mentions two functional ways in which a person's feelings can be changed when they have an emotional disorder like depression. The first is to identify, question, and alter the way one thinks about a given situation while the second one: involves altering the interactions of an individual with the environment. How people start to view a situation, determines how they possibly start to feel and act towards it. Several studies have shown that people who suffer from depression have distorted cognitions and these distortions both originated from and perpetuated the depressed state (Beck, Rush, Shaw, and Emery 1979; Beck 2005). Depressed patients tend to give 'cognitive bias' such as coming to quick conclusions, focusing only on the negative aspects of situations, black-and-white thinking, or magnifying the worst-case scenario. CBT enables people to acknowledge maladaptive thoughts, and challenge them with adaptive ones or replace them with positive behaviours. CBT is characterized by client involvement in treatment and problem-solving, establishing of goals, active questioning and responding to the client's views and feelings, use of empathy, use of questioning to assist the client in self-discovery, use of inferences, completing of tasks, and identification of treatment-interfering processes.

***CBT and Vedantic Psychology in Concept and Practice:***

Here, Vedanta helps people to liberate themselves from suffering, mental illness depression, and anxiety. Vedanta is not religion as other universal, theistic, and spiritualisms, belong to the world. While the culturally rooted lineages teach reincarnation or other metaphysical phenomena, Vedantic psychology does not assert any of them. Death or the existence of the soul after one has died. Therefore, Vedanta like science and scientific experimentation is an unending continuous unestablished process and there are numerous sub-branches and schools of Vedanta as well. What is important to remember is that voices in the cultural discussion may raise questions such as the question of whether researchers and clinicians ought to bring religious manifestations into the realm of science. This argument would however be quite sound and proper if we were having a debate on the admissibility of the mystic presumptions at a time when science was not exploring, experimenting, and reproducing. Moreover, if we proceed to accept the assumptions of theistic faiths or declare that there exists a God, gods, and special supernatural beings the existence of which cannot be disproved then surely, we are on very thin ice intellectually and in terms of ontology. However, the act of including Vedanta in the process of development of international psychology that is most appropriate for the state of human nature doesn't achieve any of the aforementioned. The amalgamation of CBT and Vedanta presents an empirically informed understanding of the assimilation of applied psychological systems for pain relief as emerging cross-culturally and trans diagnostically. Using the resources of Vedanta psychology in a practical context could be explained as the phenomenon of revelation and personal epistemology. Vedanta psychology is therefore learned through study rather through word of mouth or through blind faith. In this case, Vedanta offers a different approach to the existence of human life by complementing the experience relative to the causality and the play between the real world and kenning. The Shankaracharya, then Swami Vivekananda indeed gave a practical implementation of these approaches before evolving a novel method for training the mind for the sake of escaping the domain of suffering. The Vedantic approach therefore shifted from spirituality or supernatural exercises to individual

## **Vedanta Meets CBT: An Introductory Exploration for Cognitive-Behavioural Therapists**

actions and tangible effects. The approach went through consistent research and evolution with the assistance of millions of Hindu monks, scholars, and laypeople across the world. Though this process did not follow the order given by Western science, there has always been the more refined scientifically elaborated Vedantic psychology included in the Vedanta.

### ***Overview of Vedantic informed psychotherapy:***

It is the objective of psychology to identify repeated practices and the environments in which they take place; there is no censure here. Vedanta, however, speaks of tenderness, love, and pleasure and asserts that the soul of all people is intrinsically pure. Whereas Vedanta has a divine connotation to this overall order, psychology defines it as being situational. In other words, both Vedanta and psychology are intended to help a person acknowledge his or her feelings and deeds within him/her. In both styles, the person is supported and assisted to accept him or herself. It is a universal truth that, emotional health is as important as physical health that is accepted by psychology as well as Vedanta. The former is translated as the “veil of ignorance” (āvaraëa) which covers one’s consciousness and the “projection” (vikñepa) which causes one to think they are a petty human being. While psychology deals with the removal of these masks, Vedanta has a similar approach yet the final aim of Vedanta is the unveiling of the self as Brahman, an absolute final truth. During the therapy process, the patient is helped in the identification and understanding of their emotions; often having latent impacts. Similarly, Vedanta uses both knowledge and feeling to make a person awaken and know who he is. Both of the systems recognize the importance of handling psychological pressures, which Vedanta explains are prerequisites to embracing its prescription. Hence, on issues like the need for the validation of emotions, the handling of unconscious histories and the development of self-acceptance, psychology and Vedanta are congruent. Vedanta goes further to offer a path as to how one can reach a state of attaining the infinite self, which makes one free and emotionally balanced.

### ***To cause emotional pain and suffering according to Vedanta:***

I don’t want to enslave myself, but labelling is unavoidable. In Sanskrit, it has been referred to as bandha or bandhana. It even stems from the Sanskrit word bandh meaning bind. While the term for the real bondage is called bandha. It would be an indication that you are behind the bars. There are some things that it is impossible to avoid in life, and some of those are things one may like to see themselves free from. What is it that someone does not think? The thing is that it is predetermined in our culture that most of us do not wish to have suffering and despair, limitations, anxiety, wrinkles, sickness, or death. It degenerates into a form of slavery for the identified individual whenever he or she holds on to things he or she has no affection for. It is the feeling of moving away from something but cannot get away and avoid it. I want to be happy and end this absurd war inside me, but I don’t have that power. I am at my worst when I am in a state of insecurity, at the same time, I want to get out of it. Bondage is that. This is evident in situations where bondage is related to insecurity. Bondage, therefore is the same as being put in bondage to time. When one is limited by several restraints that are placed upon him, then it is said that he is in bondage. To whom is the bondage felt? That is how Vedanta looks at it. The gross physical entity is oblivious to the chains. The mind doesn’t either. Plato established, in its most basic sense, that the mind is a kãraëa or tool. This is the bondage that is felt within the entity or the ‘person/ego’. All the same, there is an impression of bondage anywhere there is any “I” feeling no matter the person. Not physical or a form of slavery which I wish I were someone else. To Vedanta, becoming is a form of bondage, thus, this should not be the ultimate goal. We call it saäsãrathe above-given terms will now be discussed in detail separately along with the

different interpretations given to them. Whereas the 'I am a saàsärin' means I am not willing to accept myself as I am now. That's saàsära. The saàsärin is the owner of saàsära. This is the person who appears to become a saàsärin due to a decision he or she wanted to make. For this reason, I'm not a satisfied person which I am at the moment and thus I can't help but want more. I desire to be the type of person that is accepted fully coupled with being acceptable so that I can be free. For the sake of this argument, let me say, I become into that person as concerning achievement or earning or health. Then I want to become, once more I scare myself to death and occasionally burst into tears. I am constantly transitioning, for this cause. That's known as saàsära. This freedom is impossible, but it is achieved by the constant process of becoming, as shown in this show. Those who try to wish themselves free betray the fact that they are not free and hence one cannot become free. As our Pseudo-self tries to achieve freedom, the Vedanta sees it as an effort to reject freedom since it reveals self-non-acceptance. This is the first sin or problem, if you may call it, that the city has or faced. The underlying problem is the fact that this desire or need to change identity is persistent. I hope I want to see that in the other I am recognized as a free human being who is no longer a 'becoming' and hence no longer desires.

### ***A brief introduction to the Vedantic view on the Body, Consciousness, and Soul:***

The dominant paradigm of contemporary biology describes organisms as mechanistic entities, consisting of easily distinguishable components, regulated by the genetic software. Another case of doubt was thrown into the fixed opinion that genes are the fundamental units of life organization by the transposon studies conducted by Barbara McClintock. As a result, the discovery of other unknown types of genetic transfer will weaken the latter's core concepts, says Nobel Prize laureate Francis Crick. Because of this, focus equates to the cell and, to a greater extent, the organism; key emphasis is therefore placed on the relative activity of genetic material as a component of a much larger system. Biology in today's world realizes that it is impossible to comprehend life based on individual genes and genomic areas alone. As many have pointed out, or as many environmentalists have pointed out, all species, habitats, and natural events are connected and thus no type of creature can live in isolation. There is more and more data, that cast doubt upon this traditional dogma of genetics that genes determine biological function and a new biological perspective that links awareness to life. Nevertheless, the Upanishads are the source of the philosophical philosophy known as Vedanta which propounds an entirely different outlook. This approach just supposes that there is just one conscious reality which is emission from other things. The process of knowing who we are in spirit terms is by the aphorisms in the Vedanta Sutra such as "Atatho brahma jijnasa" meaning the inquiry into the nature of the absolute. Although most aphorisms of Charaka are comprehensible, some of them present a controversy; thus, let us analyze the second aphorism, "Janmadyasyayato." The Srimad Bhagavatam gives ideas regarding the nature of the Lord and the creation and is a well-known supplementary to the Vedanta Sutras. This viewpoint is also shared by science pointing to the fact that, in the universe, both matter and life originate from living beings. It is proved by scientific evidence that consciousness cannot come from a simple piece of matter and life gives birth to awareness. Vedanta has scriptural backup from the Bhagavad Gita, where the soul of each living form or awareness, what the Hindus call the atman, is given so much importance for life forms to exist and sustain. As per this explanation, awareness is a phenomenon that originated from the soul and is required for the body to function. This gives credence to the idea that life is even a creation of consciousness other than mere animal instincts. Vedanta differentiates between an infinite awareness state and a limited one. There is limited awareness in living beings that reach outside of the being through both intentional actions and involuntary reactions. Aside from mundane activities,

## Vedanta Meets CBT: An Introductory Exploration for Cognitive-Behavioural Therapists

complex activities are handled by the infinite mind, the Paramatma. While modern science does acknowledge the existence of unseen forces and some form of energy, it seems to put consciousness, an integral aspect of living organisms, aside. In Vedanta, the fact that there is a consciousness within all living things is absolute evidence of the existence of the soul. Regardless of the material changes, which are always in progress, the living being continues to have an enduring self - quite unlike machines that are aggressive relative to the physical substances. Arguments such as the observations of Dr. Jonas Frisen on cellular aging support the Vedantic view that the body has the propensity to change whilst the soul never does. Vedanta also introduces the principle of a boundless cycle of life in which the immortal essence undergoes birth, death, and reincarnation in an everchanging form based on its consciousness. Although this is subjective evolution, it is different from Darwinian evolution which emphasizes the changes in the body's structure as opposed to the psychosynthesis of self. In summary, current biological limitations concerning consciousness and existence present a strong case for the use of Vedic philosophy. It promotes a wider perspective than mere biological reductionism because it recognizes that consciousness rather than just physical processes matter in the comprehension of life and its evolution.

### CONCLUSION

The present paper attempts to explore the congruencies and inconsistencies extending from Eastern Vedantic philosophy to Western cognitive psychotherapy. Each of the cultures offers effective pieces that can supplement and integrate with the other. However, whereas Vedantic philosophy brings in the potential of extending the treatment within an individual to a more advanced understanding of self and reality, cognitive therapy strategies could be of help in achieving the Vedantic goal of the relaxation of the mind. As the world becomes more interconnected, social scientists and other specialists face the challenge of finding new ways in which reality can be constructed so that people attracted to diverse worlds can understand each other better. The essay analyzes and evaluates the differences in the approaches towards reality and perception offered by the Vedanta and cognitive psychotherapy practitioners embedded in the works of various theorists including Ellis and Beck et al. In cognitive therapy, by addressing the present, one's perspective is shifted to end suffering while in Vedanta one strives to overcome pain by seeking a reunion with God and the ultimate truth. These two approaches western and Eastern though with differing aims as the natural interpretation of the advocates do well in principles. Despite the mental paradigms that each aims to accomplish being different, the two are very much complementary to each other. Though more and more cognition therapies and techniques can work towards accomplishing short relaxation than that which is desired in Vedanta, quite simplified and basic achievement of self-realization, nonetheless, cognition therapies, especially within parlance radical cognitivism do more psychological changes than what is recommended.

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## Vedanta Meets CBT: An Introductory Exploration for Cognitive-Behavioural Therapists

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### **Acknowledgment**

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

**How to cite this article:** Manna, B., Bera, S. & Mohakud, L.L. (2025). Vedanta Meets CBT: An Introductory Exploration for Cognitive-Behavioural Therapists. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 13(2), 3601-3607. DIP:18.01.317.20251302, DOI:10.25215/1302.317