

## Integrating Panchklesha with Contemporary Clinical Models: Unifying Theories of Psychological Suffering

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### ABSTRACT

The Patanjali Yoga Sutra says that the source of human suffering comes from Avidya (ignorance). The presence of avidya causes multiple types of kleshas (conflicts) within the chitta (the functional mind), namely Asmita (pride), Raga (attachment), Dvesha (aversion) and Abhinivesha (fear of death). These give rise to psychological issues that might cause deviations in one's life. The way to rid oneself from these kleshas is to get clarity of chitta and purify the vrittis (fluctuations of the mind). Such deviations are also found in our contemporary clinical models, and can be seen in the forms of maladaptive tendencies, or abnormal behaviour. The correlation of the indigenous knowledge with the contemporary models of psychology unifies the two knowledge systems and effectuate a holistic understanding and allows us to be more congruent with our true selves. The goal of this review paper is to have a better understanding of these indigenous concepts of psychology and apply them to our daily lives.

**Keywords:** *Yoga Sutra, Chitta, Vritti, Behaviour, Schema, Avidya*

Our indigenous literature suggests that *chitta*, our functional mind, carries out complex operations like cognition, formation of our ego, emotional processing and instinctual tendencies that develop over *samskaras* (subconscious impressions) and *vasanas* (subtle tendencies). It is the central hub that governs our mental process and lifestyle, ultimately affecting our health and well-being. At its optimal state, the *chitta* has clarity and is devoid of any false knowledge, but by all means that is an ideal state of being that only a handful of people are able to achieve.

Our contemporary literature focuses on being a fully functional individual and becoming self-actualized as its ultimate goal, contrary to the Indian perspective, where samadhi is the end goal. Even so, samadhi is a state that a person cannot achieve in a singular lifetime, it takes the experience of multiple karmic cycles of lifetimes to finally break free of the cycle. So, in this lifetime, the best one can do is to be a fully functional person and work towards being our best possible self, free of any afflictions or distortions.

The *chitta* is occupied by *vrittis* (fluctuations within the consciousness), a culmination of which influences our behaviour and thought processes. *Vrittis* are divided into 5 categories,

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## Integrating Panchklesha with Contemporary Clinical Models: Unifying Theories of Psychological Suffering

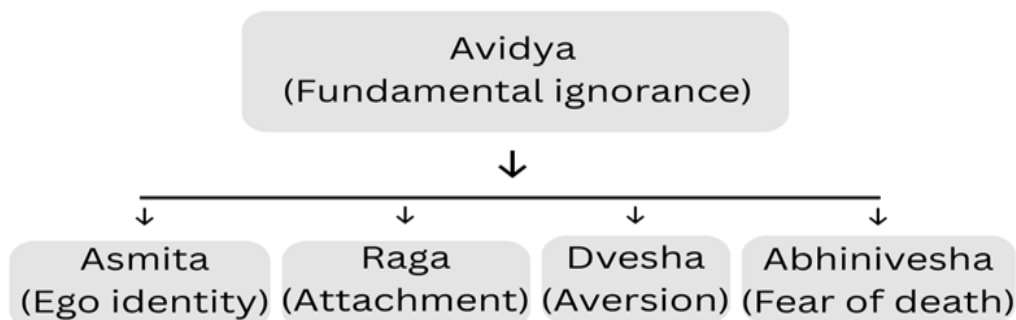
*pramana* (logical perception), *vipraya* (illogical cognition), *vikalpa* (imagination), *nidra* (sleep) and *smriti* (memory) (Singh and Sia, 2010). Each category of *vrittis* can further be of two types, *klishtha* (painful) *vrittis* that causes pain and suffering which are caused by *avidya* and *aklishta* (not painful) *vrittis* that aids in soothing the mind and its afflictions. The practise of yoga focuses on destroying the *klishtha vrittis* and then stabilizing the *aklishta vrittis* to gain *samadhi* (liberation) (Trivedi, 2023).

*Avidya* (ignorance; unwisdom, a more precise word for it) is the source of all suffering as stated in the ancient Vedic texts, it is an active and profound misperception of the reality and a lack of wisdom (Angiras, 2025). *Panchkleshas* are the 5 five manifestations of mental suffering that occur due to *klishtha vrittis* and mental afflictions or distortions. In this paper, we are going to focus on the *Panchkleshas* and attempt to explore how with the help of both indigenous and contemporary practices we can have a more holistic approach towards health and wellbeing.

### Correlation Of Panchklesha with the Contemporary Theories

According to Maharishi Patanjali, *Kleshas* are mental afflictions that give rise to psychological suffering. They are, *Avidya* (ignorance), *Asmita* (I-ness or egoism), *Raga* (attachment), *Dvesha* (aversion) and *Abhinivesha* (fear of death). *Avidya* is the root cause of all *kleshas* and the other four *kleshas* are by-products of it.

Figure 1. Illustration of Avidya giving rise to other four kleshas



*Avidya* is the *klesha* due to which, one may perceive things opposite to what it actually is, impure as pure, non-eternal as eternal, sufferance as pleasure, it is the mother *klesha* that breeds other *kleshas* (Bhavanani). It causes cognitive distortions that influences all aspects of life.

The term cognitive distortion was coined by Beck in 1963, he described it as idiosyncratic (peculiar or abnormal) thoughts that form unrealistic or distorted perceptions (Mann et al., 2002). Cognitive distortions arise from schemas. These are maladaptive biases that are formed due to past experiences or misinterpretation of the said experiences. It can be sensory-motor as well, where in, a sensory input that is anticipated triggers an action that is pre-planned based on the perception (Arbib, 1992) or the past experience of a person.

Here, you can see how major a role *avidya* plays in the development of such distortions in cognition. When you fail to understand the true nature of something (be it an object or an experience), you develop misinformed or under-informed schemas about it, which leads to distorted or faulty cognition, which in turn leads to maladaptive or deviant behaviour.

## Integrating Panchklesha with Contemporary Clinical Models: Unifying Theories of Psychological Suffering

*Asmita* is the pure and absolute unawareness of your true self and your consciousness. It is the egoism or I-ness that becomes the main obstacle in the pursuance of true knowledge and refrains you from obtaining spiritual height. Due to such incongruence between your true conscious and the conscious that you believe to be true, it gives rise to many psycho-social issues (Malik et al., 2021).

In the contemporary context, *Asmita* or egoism can construct a persona, and as you are completely ignorant about your true self, you believe your persona to be it. Thus, even though unconsciously, you create intrapersonal conflicts that you do not understand how to resolve, and so I believe it to be the most twisted affliction of all, feeling your internal conflicts and not knowing where it is stemming from, you feel deep insecurities, depression, fear, anxiety, a sense of loneliness that arises from being isolated but you are surrounded by social connections, all this because you are not in touch with your true self, it creates internal conflicts and loneliness because the social bonds that you are forming are with your persona and not You.

People interpret the concept of persona differently, some might perceive the Jungian persona as a continuous performance that a person plays (Giles, 2020), while another perspective on it could be that it is a mask of performance that people put on only in social settings (Marshall and Barbour, 2015), it is almost entirely impossible to give an absolute definition of what it is. However, almost everyone can agree that the persona of a person is different from their true self, and to achieve their best possible self that is not ridden with conflicts, one has to be in touch with their true self.

*Raga* is the *klesha* of attachment or attraction, stemming from desire to experience things that might give a feeling of happiness or euphoria. In the Yogic context, the concept of attachment, whether positive or negative is considered to be not good. The concept of *Nishkama Karma* states that a person should fulfil their duty and do what must be done without having any kind of attachment to the work itself or its result, it is considered to be the right way of living (Datta and Jones, 2023).

In present context, you might wonder how chasing happiness could cause afflictions, it is because the *raga* is a type of attachment that can be better classified, in my perspective, as maladaptive obsession. It is an obsession of wanting to derive happiness from things that are not necessarily good for you or may even be harmful to you.

There are a multitude of negative attachments that could cause psychological conflicts:

- A fearful type of attachment with your self-image leads to hamper your close relations and avoid social interactions (Laczkovics et al., 2020).
- Having extensive emotional attachment to material possessions that arise as a coping mechanism from negative childhood experiences can lead to disorders such as Hoarding Disorder (Crone et al., 2019).
- Substance use disorder also arises from attachment to the feeling of elevation that that drugs or substances provide by altering the biological functioning of your body. Prolonged use of such substances is very detrimental to your health.
- Attachment to experiences can also be maladaptive, believing in blind-faith or unnecessary rituals because you saw it growing up and an excessive attachment to God or the image one has of God and being too dependent on it.

## Integrating Panchklesha with Contemporary Clinical Models: Unifying Theories of Psychological Suffering

*Dvesha* is the *Klesha* that arises from pain, dislike, hatred and avoidance. While the avoidance might root from a pain that might be caused by any action, not engaging in said action might cause pain as well. A very simple example for it, avoiding trying to make friends in new social settings (like, in your new school), you avoid it because you fear that they might reject you, but then being lonely or isolated also causes you distress.

Fear can be both rational and irrational, while the rational fear is there to protect us by making us take preventive measures against potential risk factors, irrational fear is negative and can cause psychological pressure, and maladaptive responses to harmless situations. Phobias arise from *dvesha*, deep seated hatred or aversion towards certain stimuli, it is an excessive and unnecessary reaction. Xanthophobia (fear of the colour yellow), Agoraphobia (fear of packed places) or Bibliophobia (fear of books) are examples of unnecessary or unproportionate aversion of objects or situation, causing mental suffering. Avoiding experiences by escaping the contextual situation that might be unwanted regrets or unpleasant is a coping strategy that is used in multiple disorders, depression and anxiety being the most common of them (Wang et al., 2024).

*Abhinivesha*, the final *klesha* is the fear of death that is instinctual, and is universal to everyone. It is an interplay of *Raga* and *Dvesha*, attachment towards life and aversion of death. Due to this fear of death, people tend avoid their *dharma* (duty to perform) and this leads to conflicts in their life that might lead to psychological suffering (Trivedi, 2023). Our Yogic scriptures talk about how an individual is comprised of two components, the *Jiva* and the *Atman*. The *Jiva* is the entity that connects your *Sukshma sharira* (physical body) and *Sthula sharira* (subtle body) to your consciousness, and the *Atman* is the pure and true conscious itself which is eternal and unchanging. When an individual experiences death, the *jiva* dies with them, while the *atman* lives on and is rebirthed to fulfil its karmic debts. Once the *atman* is able to break through their karmic cycle and attain *moksha* (liberation) by gaining true knowledge and removing the veil of *avidya*, it ceases to exist, or, more specifically it merges with the *Brahman* (the universe itself) and that is the ultimate goal of our yogic philosophy. Hence, the fear of death refrains a person from performing their duties and is considered to be an affliction in our indigenous scriptures.

If we look at the contemporary perspective, there is the concept of death anxiety. It is not the anxiety one feel's when coping from immediate threats to their life, but it is the constant anxiety that one feels in their daily life. Other than the obvious fear of death, it is the anxiety that comes from anticipating the afterlife, the state in which they would be after experiencing death (Neimeyer, 2015). Another very crucial concept is existential guilt, it is the dread one feels when they feel like they have failed to live their life to the fullest, failed to achieve anything worthwhile or to carry out their duties. In simpler words, it is the deep and almost universal fear of "losing out" on life. Existential guilt might manifest as anger, shame, depression or an intense form of death anxiety (Breitbart, 2017).

## INTERVENTIONS

### Yogic Practices

#### *Bhavanas*

"*Chitta Vritti Nirodham*" ("cease all vrittis") is the central idea of yogic therapeutic practices to attain *samadhi*. A person should strive to remove the *klishtha vrittis* with the help of *aklishtha vrittis* and then ultimately stop all *vrittis* to achieve liberation. *Bhavanas* are

## Integrating Panchklesha with Contemporary Clinical Models: Unifying Theories of Psychological Suffering

*aklishta vrittis*, they are *Maitree* (feeling of friendship), *Karuna* (Kindness and compassion), *Mudita* (cheerfulness) and *Upeksha* (indifference towards evil) (Trivedi, 2023).

***Maitree*** is the feeling of friendship and camaraderie that makes a person happy and prosperous, but practicing this should also come with discretion. When making social connections, there is always a chance that you will be influenced by the people you surround yourself with. If your peers do not have good or pure intentions towards you, it will impact your own mental health and create mental afflictions and cause psycho-social issues. To be truly happy, you must make connections with people who have pure intentions.

***Karuna*** is the virtue of compassion. You must not ignore a person who is in need or is in pain and try to assist them. But once again, discretion comes into play, you must not show kindness or compassion towards cruel people. Showing kindness to wicked people onsets a vicious cycle in the society, such people would go on to cause pain and suffering to others.

***Mudita*** is cheerfulness, you must not feel badly towards others, hypocrisy, jealousy should not be plaguing your mind. When someone is doing something good, you must appreciate them, or at the very least, not find any fault in them. Acknowledge a good deed done by a person and appreciate them, have a cheerful approach towards life itself.

***Upeksha*** is indifference towards the evil. If someone has done you wrong, or portrayed a socially deviant behaviour, do not take it upon yourself to exact your revenge or punish them. Do not let hatred be manifested in your mind, keep your conscious clear, be indifferent towards it. When a person does bad things, it is their karmic burden that they are amassing, they will face the consequences of their action when it will be appropriate for them. Do not burden yourself by thinking or wishing ill of them.

### ***Kriya yoga and Ashtanga yoga***

The *kriya yoga* consists of three components, *Tapa* (penance and discipline), *Swadhyaya* (self-study) and *Ishwarpranidhana* (surrender to the divine power). These three components are vital to follow in order to eradicate *vrittis*. These are actions that indirectly lead to the practice of yoga (Bapat, 2016).

***Tapa*** is the effort you put into being self-disciplined, it purifies your body and mind. ***Swadhyaya*** is self-study, it is to gain true knowledge and awareness of your real self. ***Ishwarpranidhana*** is the act of surrendering to God or a higher divine power, you do your karma and dedicate the fruits of your action to the divine power, without claiming the products of your actions.

While the *Kriya yoga* itself consists of the three components only, to be able to practice *Tapa*, you have to be adhered to the ***niyamas***, ***asanas*** and ***pranayamas*** of the *Ashtanga yoga* as mentioned in the Patanjali Yoga Sutra. *Niyamas* will let you integrate self-discipline in your life, while *asanas* and *pranayamas* will help you purify your body and soul.

### **Contemporary Practices**

#### ***Cognitive Behavioural Therapy***

CBT focuses on fixing cognitive distortions what arise from schemas. The schemas themselves are idiosyncratic in nature and thus give rise to unrealistic or maladaptive thoughts and behaviour. In this method, therapists use Socratic questioning (open-ended

## **Integrating Panchklesha with Contemporary Clinical Models: Unifying Theories of Psychological Suffering**

questions) to probe on the assumptions and faulty beliefs of a person (Fenn and Byrne, 2013) and such type of questioning tend to instigate critical thinking. By doing so, you can identify faulty schemas, be able to reinterpret it and modify it to logical cognition.

CBT can be used to ease the psychological symptoms that present due to *avidya*, *asmita* or any other *klesha*. All of these *kleshas* arise from faulty knowledge and misinformation, and such are seen in their symptoms. To be a fully functional person, we must be able to think and act logically.

### ***Mindfulness and Exposure Therapy***

Mindfulness has two central features, it grounds a person's consciousness to experience the present moment, and it allows the person to have voluntary acceptance towards the said experiences (Creswell, 2017). It is a simple act of paying attention to yourself and your surroundings that helps people gain insight about the nature of one's suffering. It teaches you to accept your experiences with detachment. Excessive attachment to things causes psychological conflicts, mindfulness helps you strike a healthy balance and be able to let go of things.

Likewise, excessive aversion of things is detrimental to mental health as well, constant fear or hatred towards something is dysfunctional. While the process is long and slow, Exposure therapy allows a person to confront their feared memories or situation in a controlled and therapeutic manner. It helps people who are suffering from phobias and panic disorders, and as an adaptive treatment for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Rothbaum and Schwartz, 2002). It is used to systematically desensitize a person towards an unwanted or aversive stimuli, while providing relaxations in between to not cause excessive distress to the person during this process.

### ***Existential therapy***

Existential therapy curbs existential guilt or crisis, or the fear of dying and leaving behind a meaningless life by using the phenomenological method. It is a client-centred approach focusing on the exploration of a person's life experiences to see a sense of being and accomplishments in those experiences, eventually finding meaning in the life they have lived. The main role of existential therapy is to find a personal meaning and purpose to life and helping the individuals overcome hardships by turning sufferings into an opportunity for changing oneself and turning those sufferings into achievement and accomplishment.

## **CONCLUSION**

Even in today's world the root cause of suffering is seen to be lying in the cognitive distortions that one has. Therefore, the concept of Panchklesha found in the yogic texts could also be seen as form of those cognitive distortions and the root cause of all the suffering. When we combine this yogic perspective with the contemporary framework, a more profound and holistic understanding of oneself would be found which could then help us achieve the state of psychological well-being. Be it Indian or Western perspective, the end goal of therapy or the stage of a person with little to no mental suffering, is the state where a person understands their true identity, is self-actualised, and is in the spiritual journey. When the goal of both in some ways meet at the same corner then why should the understanding of mental disorders, their causes, and interventions not include both? When therapeutic practices integrate both the perspectives and tailor them to individual's needs and beliefs the best possible outcomes are seen.

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## Integrating Panchklesha with Contemporary Clinical Models: Unifying Theories of Psychological Suffering

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

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