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The Psychodynamics of the Upanishads: An East-West Epistemological Synthesis

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Abstract

The historical evolution of psychodynamics traces its roots back to Sigmund Freud's pioneering work in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Over the time, his theories were expanded and refined by subsequent thinkers who introduced new perspectives on social influences, interpersonal relationships, and cultural factors, thereby broadening the scope and application of psychodynamic thought. Psychodynamic theory, at its core, explores the hidden workings of the mind (antahkaran) by emphasizing the fact that unconscious drives and associated early life experiences do shape our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Key concepts like repression, defence mechanisms, and the tripartite structure of the id, ego, and superego. Contemporary empirical validity for psychodynamic concepts is an ongoing area of research. Researching the psychodynamics of the Upanishads and Yoga Sutra offer a fascinating exploration into ancient Indian thought where much has been said about the human mind and its inner workings. These ancient Indian texts, delve deeply into concepts like the effulgent self (Atman) and its relationship to the ultimate reality (Brahman). These texts treat Mind as a separate and independant identity and opines that it has infinite is the capabilities. The commentary of Vyas on Patanjal Sutras describes five stages of mind i.e. vikshipt, kshipt, Moodh, nirudha and Ekagra which seems to be a better actual configuration than the model proposed by Freud. Understanding these philosophical underpinnings can reveal how the Upanishads aimed to address existential anxieties and foster psychological well-being through introspection and ethical living.

Keywords

The Upanishads; Upanishadic Psychology; Psycho-Dynamics; Ancient Indian Wisdom; Indian thought Process

1. Introduction

The profound psychodynamic insights of the Upanishads provide fertile ground for comparative analysis with Western psychoanalytic and transpersonal theories, revealing significant areas of convergence alongside critical epistemological splits. While Sigmund Freud is historically positioned within the lineage of Western scientific rationalism, his conceptual genealogy is deeply tied to Eastern metaphysics. Thirty years before Freud published his structural model of the psyche, the German philosopher Eduard von Hartmann published "The Philosophy of the Unconscious", a work that integrated Arthur Schopenhauer's extensive translations of the Upanishads and Buddhist philosophy (Izzo, 2009). Furthermore, Freud adopted his concept of the Id directly from Georg Groddeck's "The Book of the It", in which Groddeck asserted that the individual ego is lived by a cosmic Tao or organic universal spirit (Groddeck, 1949). There are striking parallels between Freud's tripartite model of the psyche and the Upanishadic Triguna framework:

- The Id and Tamas: Both represent primal, biological instincts operating on the pleasure principle, seeking immediate gratification without regard for societal rules or consequences. Unchecked, they manifest as mental inertia, delusion, and regression.
- The Ego and Rajas: Both function as the dynamic, reality-negotiating centre of the personality. The ego's struggle to balance the demands of the impulsive Id and the moralistic Superego mirrors the active, ambitious, and emotionally volatile nature of Rajas.
- The Superego and Sattva: Both represent internalized moral values, ethical conscience, and the aspiration toward purity, knowledge, and harmony.

However, a fundamental epistemological split exists between their ultimate therapeutic goals. Freudian psychoanalysis operates within a deterministic framework, aiming merely to strengthen the ego's defences so that the individual can manage the inevitable conflicts of life (Whitfield, 2009).

Historically, Freud's theory was followed and elaborated by Carl Gustav Jung who engaged deeply and explicitly with Indian philosophy, studying the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, and the Yoga Sutras. Jung drew direct parallels between his concept of the Collective Unconscious i.e "The shared, inherited psychic repository common to all human beings which is at par with the Upanishadic concept of Brahman or cosmic consciousness. Similarly, he interpreted Hindu deities as cultural projections of universal psychic Archetypes, and viewed the process of Individuation (integrating the conscious and unconscious aspects of the psyche) as a Western equivalent to Moksha. The Jungian concept of psychodynamics can be understood in a four-pronged psychodynamics which can be summarized as

- Collective Unconscious or Brahman i.e. Cosmic Consciousness: A shared, universal repository that underlies and connects all individual minds. Jung viewed it as a psychic structure; Vedanta views it as ontologically primary reality.
- Archetypes or Deities (Universal Forms) Universal symbols and patterns that manifest in myths, dreams, and art. Jung analysed deities as intrapsychic projections; Vedanta views them as cosmic expressions of Brahman.
- Individuation or Self-Realization: The process of integrating the conscious and unconscious to achieve wholeness. Jung required the preservation of the ego; Vedanta demands the dissolution of ego-identification.
- The Self or Isvara (The Personal Lord): The integrated centre of the total personality, balancing opposites. The Jungian Self remains within the dualistic psyche; the Atman transcends the dualistic mind.

Despite these profound parallels, Jung maintained a critical scepticism toward Eastern claims of supreme, non-dual states of consciousness. Jung believed that the ego is the only possible centre of consciousness, arguing that any state claiming to transcend the ego-centre is a "vain illusion" that ignores the necessary polarities of human nature (Waite, 2003).

From the perspective of Advaita Vedanta, Jung's theoretical hesitation represents a state of adhyasa: A state of cognitive error of superimposing the true subject of awareness (Atman) onto the mental and somatic instruments of perception[1]. Because Jung could not conceive of consciousness existing independent of the psychological ego, his definition of the " there. Despite this, Bion's later works develop a highly original mystical epistemology that Scholars have noted bears striking parallels with Upanishadic non-dualism, even if direct influence cannot be established influence formulated a highly original, epistemological model of the mind that closely mirrors Upanishadic mysticism (Bion, 1938). Bion's central concept "O" represents "the unknowable and the unreachable ultimate truth," absolute reality, or the Godhead. In his late work, Bion crossed the boundary of traditional clinical practices, asserting that the psychoanalyst must abandon memory, desire, and understanding: the tools of the intellectual ego in order to achieve direct "oneness" with "O". This clinical approach directly mirrors the neti-neti ("Not this, Not this") method of the Upanishads, which asserts that the absolute Self cannot be known as an external object of perception as it is not a physical commodity, but can only be realized by direct, non-dual identity while sitting in a state of deep meditation. Bion's algebraic model of thinking also features structural correspondences with the Upanishadic Antahkarana (The core of inner self where the mind, Chit buddhi and ego actually (Reiner, 1982) resides:

- Beta Elements: Bion used this term for raw, unprocessed, somatic, and sensory-emotional impressions that cannot be thought and must be evacuated or projected. This corresponds to raw sensory impressions in the Manas and Pranayama Kosha that have not yet been digested by discriminative intelligence.
- Alpha Function or Container-Contained: The capacity of the mind to receive, metabolize, and

transform these raw beta elements into thinkable, dream able Alpha Elements (concepts, memories, and symbolic thoughts). This functions precisely like the Buddhi (discriminative intellect), which intervenes to organize and make sense of the sensory fluctuations of the Manas.

Recent interdisciplinary research has mapped Bion's dream theories and Upanishadic states of consciousness onto contemporary neuroscientific models of psychopathology, specifically regarding schizophrenia-spectrum disorders. In these frameworks, schizophrenia is understood as a fundamental "Self-Disorder" or anomalous self-experience, characterized by a catastrophic breakdown of the dreaming and sleep system. When the brain's "container-contained" mechanism fails, the individual is flooded by unprocessed, raw sensory impressions (beta elements) during both waking and sleeping states, leading to the collapse of the narrative ego and the experience of psychotic fragmentation. By integrating the Upanishadic model of Turiya—which establishes a silent, unconditioned witness consciousness beneath all mental fluctuations—clinicians can offer patients an immutable existential anchor. This transpersonal grounding helps re-integrate anomalous self-experiences into a non-dual cosmic continuum, transforming ontological terror into a peaceful surrender to ultimate reality.

2. Material and Method

The evolution of classical Indian thought represents a structural transition from the externalised, liturgical transactionalism of the early Vedic times to a contemplative metaphysics of the Upanishads with the systematized psychological disciplines of the Yoga Sutras. According to traditional Indian chronology, The Vedas are considered eternal (apaurusheya) and are dated to the dawn of creation, how ever, modern academic scholarship places the composition of the Rigeveda between approximately 1500-1200 BCE and tend to secure cosmic balance, fertility, and worldly blessings through physical sacrifice (*yajna*) by way of praying to the Supreme Power.

However, during the late Vedic period (circa 800–500 BCE) (Basham, 1967), this ritualistic framework underwent a profound internal transformation where the centre of prayers got shifted to the internal world highlighting the unity between the self and the Power Supreme[2]. The Upanishadic sages, or *Rishis*, interiorized the sacrificial fires into the vital breaths of the human body, shifting the primary focus of spiritual life from external priestly rites to the cultivation of inner awareness about the self[3]. This paradigm shift established Vedanta ("the end or conclusion of the Vedas") as a highly introspective, existential inquiry into the absolute nature of reality i.e the self that is effulgent and undiminishable.

The Upanishads do not present a singular, monolithic philosophical system, but rather a dynamic collection of metaphysical insights, dialogues, and poetic outlines compiled over several centuries. These texts refer to the highly restricted, arcane teaching sessions where a spiritual preceptor transmitted secret doctrines to a circle of disciples who come to them with a quest to know their inner self. While more than two hundred texts claim the title of Upanishad, the *Muktika* canon establishes a traditional list of 108 texts, of which thirteen are universally recognized as principal Upanishads.

This chronology highlights how the Upanishads slowly moved away from cosmology toward a highly focused interest in human psychology and soteriology. The term *Atman*—which appears sporadically in the oldest layers of the *Rig Veda*[4] to denote essence to represent the immortal, unchanging subjective Self that pervades within all living beings[5]. In fact, the central metaphysical discovery of the Upanishads is that the ultimate reality behind the ever-changing material universe is identical to the innermost essence of the individual, *the self*[6] and *Brahman* which is described as the Power behind the cosmos, a collective form of pure consciousness, and the uncaused and that is the cause of all existence that has engulfed the entire cosmos.[7] Because *Brahman* is non-dual and entirely without physical or conceptual attributes, the Upanishadic sages frequently utilised apophatic theology to articulate its nature.

This non-dual identity between the individual Self and the universal ground of being is the foundation of Upanishadic soteriology. While the *Atman* pervades the entire physical body, the Upanishads often poetically locate its special locus deep within the heart, which is not as a physical organ, but rather a radiant core of human awareness that propels the mind into activity. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, the *Atman* is identified as the underlying witness of the intellect (*buddhi*), the sensory mind (*manas*), and the vital breath, remaining untouched by virtuous or non-virtuous actions, even though the physical ego becomes virtuous through good acts and vicious through evil acts[8]. The realization of this identity is formulated in the four Great Utterances of the Vedic tradition. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, the sage Yajnavalkya emphasises that *Brahman* cannot be grasped by the senses or identified as material object by our physical senses, untouched by physical sorrow. Probably, the dialogues between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad represent one of the earliest and most comprehensive and

sophisticated recorded explorations of what would later be termed as Psychodynamics,[9] predating Western psychoanalytic thought by over two millennia. Yajnavalkya's insistence that the self can be grasped by the senses or conceptualised by the mind, but it can only be realised through direct experiential insight, anticipates the core principles of depth psychology.[10] This apophatic model is mirrored in the *Kena Upanishad*, which asserts that *Brahman* is that which cannot be seen by the eyes, explained by words or conceptualised by the mind, but gives the power to mind to engage it in various actions.

The direct, experiential realisation of these Great Utterances leads to liberation. Upanishadic philosophy teaches that suffering is caused by ignorance (*avidya*), which leads individuals to identify themselves with the physical body and mental constructs. When this ignorance is dissolved, the individual realises that they are not separate from the absolute, like a river flowing into the sea and losing its separate name and form.

This liberation is achievable during physical life, resulting in the state of a *jivanmukta* (a state of blissful existence after realising the self). The *jivanmukta* continues to inhabit a physical body and is subject to natural physical conditions, but is entirely freed from the binding influence of karma, creating no new karmic seeds while waiting for previously accumulated karma (*prarabdha*) to naturally exhaust itself.

The transition from speculative metaphysics to systematic, somatic practices is documented in the middle-to-late principal Upanishads, most notably the *Katha*, *Shvetashvatara*, and *Maitri*. These texts contain the earliest explicit mentions of yogic methodology, framing Yoga as a disciplined psychophysical path to realise the self.

The *Katha Upanishad* (dated between the 5th and 1st centuries BCE) is the first text to specifically outline and define Yoga as a systematic method to attain a stage of self-illumination. Written as a dramatic dialogue between the young seeker Nachiketa and Yama, the God of Death, the *Katha* uses the famous proto-Samkhya analogy of the chariot to describe the path of self-control which is equivalent to the dialogue between Arjuna and Shri Krishna.

Yama explains that if the driver (the intellect) is unskilled and the reins (the mind) are loose, the horses (the senses) run wild, leading the chariot to destruction in the cycle of rebirth. However, if the driver is wise and holds the reins firmly, the senses are controlled like well-trained horses, guiding the seeker to the highest state of liberation[11]. This state of complete sensory and mental stillness is defined in *Katha Upanishad* : "When the five perceptions are stilled, together with the mind, and not even reason bestirs itself; they call it the highest state. When senses are firmly reined in, that is Yoga, so people think. From distractions a man is then free, for Yoga is the coming-into-being, as well as the ceasing-to-be."[12] This passage defines Yoga as a deep, conscious stillness where sensory inputs and intellectual fluctuations are suspended, allowing the underlying *Atman* to be perceived in its pristine state. The *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* expands upon this by integrating theistic devotion to Lord Shiva with practical instructions for meditation. In its first chapter, the text speaks of the ancient sages who, "having achieved the Yoga of Meditation (*Dhyana Yoga*), perceived the divine power (*Shakti*) hidden in its own qualities"[13] comparing the realization of the Self with squeezing oil from sesame seeds or churning butter from cream.[14]

In Chapter II, the *Shvetashvatara* outlines the physical and mental parameters of yoga practice, drawing upon older Vedic verses dedicated to Savitr, the solar deity representing inner divine intelligence. The somatic instructions are highly specific:

"Holding his body steady with the three (upper parts) erect, and causing the senses with the mind to enter into the heart, a wise man with the Brahma-boat should cross over all the fear-bringing streams. Having repressed his breathings here in the body, and having his movements checked, one should breathe through his nostrils with diminished breath, like a chariot yoked with vicious horses, his mind the wise man should restrain undistractedly."[15]

This passage establishes several foundational techniques of Patanajal Yoga sutra:

- Posture: Keeping "the three upper parts erect" refers to aligning the navel, heart, and head, instructing the yogi to maintain a straight spine in a balanced, seated posture.
- Interiorization: Drawing the senses and the mind away from external objects and merging them "into the heart" to overcome dualistic distractions.
- Pranayama: Controlling the vital breath by "diminishing" and regulating the exhalation through the nostrils to calm the nervous system.
- Concentration: Restraining the wandering mind, which is compared to a chariot pulled by wild, unmanageable horses.

The *Shvetashvatara* also details the environmental conditions and physical signs of progress. The yogi is advised to practice in a level, clean, quiet, and secluded place, free of wind, water, gravel, and insects. During deep meditation, specific visual signs—such as mist, smoke, sun, fire, lightning, or fireflies—appear in the mind, indicating a direct

connection with the divine.

Furthermore, the "fire of yoga" is said to purify the five elemental components of the body (*pancha-tattva*), leading to physiological signs of progress yielding to lightness of the body, stable physical health, stable posture, a clear complexion, a pleasant voice, a sweet body scent, and a significant reduction in bodily excretions and toxins.

The *Maitri Upanishad* (also known as the *Maitrayaniya*) provides a highly structured synthesis of these early practices[16]. "The precept for effecting this (unity) is this:

This schema contains five of the limbs later codified by Patanjali, substituting Patanjali's ethical disciplines (*yama*, *niyama*) and physical posture (*asana*) with *tarka* (mindful inquiry or reflective contemplation). The *Maitri* also provides specific somatic instructions, such as pressing the tip of the tongue against the palate to restrain the voice, mind, and breath, thereby allowing the practitioner to perceive the brilliant, subtle Self[17]. It defines Yoga in as the absolute oneness of the breath, the mind, and the senses, alongside the complete relinquishment of all worldly conditions of existence. We can find same idea in other Upanishads such as Bhagavad Gita[18] as "*samatvaṅ yōga ucyatē*" and "yogaḥ karmasu kauśhalam[19]". Thus, it may be said that prior to its classical codification by Patanjali, the term "Yoga" was used with considerable fluidity across various schools of classical Indian thought.

The Patanjalian Synthesis: Structure and Psychology of the Yoga Sutras

The diverse meditative and somatic practices of the Upanishads were systematically codified by the sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras*, composed between the second century BCE and the fourth century CE. Patanjali, a known grammarian and Medica man, did not invent Yoga, but rather organized the existing techniques into a highly logical, technical, and formal doctrine.

Stylistically, the *Yoga Sutras* depart from the emotional and poetic tone of the Upanishads, presenting a clinical and scientific register. For example, the emotionally charged term *Bhakti* (devotion) is replaced by the formal term *Pranidhana* (dedication/surrender), and the metaphysical term *Jiva* (soul) is replaced by the epistemological term *Drashta* (the Seer or passive observer of consciousness). The text consists of 196 aphorisms (*sutras*) divided into four chapters or books (*Padas*).

The first chapter (*Samadhi Pada*) begins with the statement of purpose[20]: ("Now is the discipline of yoga"). Patanjali then provides his definitive definition of yoga in the second sutra[21]

This translates to "Yoga is a complete cessation of the fluctuations of the mindstuff". In Patanjali's psychology, the word "*Citta*" is not a single, unified entity rather a dynamic system comprised of three distinct functions.

- *Manas*: Receives and processes sensory input from the external world.
- *Buddhi*: The higher, discerning intelligence responsible for analysis, decision-making, and wisdom.
- *Ahamkara*: Personalizes experiences, filtering them through the lens of individual identity such as "I", "me", "mine".

The *Vrittis* are the modifications and modalities, waves, or turbulent fluctuations that constantly spin within our mental frame, distorting the underlying pure awareness[22]. When the *Citta* is turbulent with *Vrittis*, the effulgent Self identifies with these mental contents (*Vrittisarupyam*), leading to a fragmented sense of self and continuous suffering.

Only when these fluctuations are completely stilled can the Seer abide in its own fundamental, undefiled nature (*Tada drashtuh swarupe awasthanam*). These mental fluctuations are simplified into five basic categories.

- *Pramana* (Valid Cognition): Right knowledge based on direct sensory perception, logical inference, or the testimony of reliable experts.
- *Viparyaya* (Misperception): False understanding or misconceptions based on an incorrect interpretation of reality.
- *Vikalpa* (Imagination): Mental constructs, verbal delusions, or fantasies that have no basis in physical reality.
- *Nidra* (Deep Sleep): A state of unconsciousness where the mind is inactive, yet latent impressions remain.
- *Smriti* (Memory): The active recollection of past experiences and sensory impressions stored in the subconscious.

To quiet these modalities or *Vrittis*, Patanjali prescribes a dual approach: *Abhyasa* (constant, disciplined practice) and *Vairagya* (non-attachment or dispassion). He explains that *Samadhi* (absorption) can be achieved in two primary stages: *Sabija* (with seed) or *Samprajnata Samadhi*, where the mind remains focused on a subtle object or concept; and *Nirbija* or *Asamprajnata Samadhi*, where all cognitive activities cease and only pure, undifferentiated consciousness remains.

As an alternative, less arduous path to quiet the mind, Patanjali suggests *Ishvara Pranidhana* (surrender to the supreme Lord), utilizing the repetition of the sacred syllable *Om* (the *Pranava*) time and time again to eliminate mental distractions[23].

To achieve an undisturbed peace of mind on a daily basis, Patanjali recommends the practice of *Citta Prasadana*[24] cultivating friendliness (*maitri*) compassion (*karuna*) delight (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upeksha*) toward the wicked—a psychological formula that mirrors the Buddhist *Brahmaviharas*.

In the second chapter (*Sadhana Pada*), Patanjali outlines the practical, step-by-step methods of *Ashtanga Yoga* (the Eight-Limbed Path).

1. Yama or Social Restraints: Ahimsa (non-violence), Satya (truthfulness), Asteya (non-stealing), Brahmacharya (sensory control), Aparigraha (non-possessiveness)
2. Niyama or Personal Observances: Shaucha (purity), Santosha (contentment), Tapas (austerity), Svadhyaya (self-study), Ishvara Pranidhana (surrender to the Lord)
3. Asana or Physical Postures
4. Pranayama or Breath Control
5. Pratyahara or Sense Withdrawal
6. Dharana or Concentration
7. Dhyana or Meditation
8. Samadhi or Deep Absorption in to self

The first five limbs are described as external aids (*bahiranga*), while the remaining three—*Dharana*, *Dhyana*, and *Samadhi*—are internal practices (*antaranga*), collectively referred to as *Samyama*.

The contribution of Sage Vyasa in this context is unique where he classifies five states of the mind in a more meaningful way which are as follows

1. The Kshipta (The Restless or Scattered Mind): Dominated by rajas (agitation). The mind is easily distracted, jumping from one thought to another like a "monkey mind," making focus impossible.
2. Mudha (The Dull or Sluggish Mind): Dominated by tamas (inertia). The mind lacks energy, is clouded by laziness, lethargy, or ignorance, and is unresponsive to positive stimuli.
3. Vikshipta (The Distracted or Oscillating Mind): While it has moments of focus, it is easily drawn away by new distractions. It is characterized by intermittent clarity interspersed with restlessness.
4. Ekagra (The One-Pointed or chiselled Mind): The mind is completely focused on a single object or thought. This is the first state conducive to meditation and deeper yoga practices.
5. Niruddha (The Controlled/Mastered Mind): The ultimate meditative state where mental fluctuations are fully arrested. The incessant chatter ceases, leading to absolute peace.

According to textual commentary the first two stages are rejected on the ground that it is not possible to follow the Yoga practice in The Restless/Scattered Mind or The Dullest/Sluggish Mind

Following the classical synthesis of Patanjali, the evolution of yogic thought continued through a group of twenty minor texts known as the *Yoga Upanishads*, composed between the late first millennium BCE and the medieval period. These texts are classified separately from the thirteen major principal Upanishads and serve as historical bridge, combining Upanishadic non-dualism with the somatic and energetic techniques of Hatha Yoga and Tantra.

Eleven of these texts including the *Brahmavidya*, *Kshurika*, *Nadabindu*, *Brahmabindu*, *Amritabindu*, *Dhyanabindu*, *Tejobindu*, *Yogashikha*, *Yogatattva*, and *Hamsa* Upanishads are associated with specific Vedic schools and focus on the practical application of yogic disciplines.

These minor Upanishads show how post-classical Yoga moved away from purely mental quietude toward a dynamic, energetic paradigm. They present the physical body not as a source of impurity to be ignored, but as a subtle energetic instrument composed of chakras and *nadis* that must be purified to achieve liberation.

3. Translative and Hermeneutical Landscapes

The academic study of these Sanskrit scriptures is heavily dependent on translation choices and hermeneutical perspectives. Different translation methodologies can shape how a modern reader understands these complex philosophical concepts.

For the Upanishads, three distinct translation styles define the academic field:

- **Philological and Historical-Critical**: Patrick Olivelle's translations (Oxford World's Classics) represent the standard for modern Indology. Olivelle incorporates recent historical and linguistic scholarship,

documenting how the Upanishads transitioned from Vedic ritualism to speculative philosophy without imposing later theological commentaries on the ancient text.

- **Literal and Commentarial**: Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's *The Principal Upanisads* includes the complete Sanskrit text in Roman transliteration, a literal translation, and extensive notes. Radhakrishnan's commentary is deeply informed by the classical non-dual interpretations of Adi Shankara, making this edition invaluable for understanding the traditional Vedantic lineage.
- **Readable and Devotional**: Translations by Eknath Easwaran or Swami Prabhavananda are designed for general readers and practitioners. While highly accessible and elegant, they frequently simplify complex technical terms—such as using the term "Lord of Love" to translate several distinct Sanskrit concepts—which can compromise academic precision.

For the *Yoga Sutras*, Edwin Bryant's translation and commentary is a major academic contribution. Bryant avoids projecting modern physical fitness or neo-Vedantic ideas onto Patanjali's text, grounding his work directly in the oldest and most authoritative classical commentary, Vyasa's *Yoga Bhashya*, along with subsequent sub-commentaries by Vacaspati Misra and Hariharananda Aranya. By presenting the Sanskrit text alongside these traditional perspectives, Bryant allows the modern reader to engage with classical Yoga as a rigorous mental discipline focused on the isolation of consciousness.

4. Results and Discussion

The roots of Indian psychological inquiry are deeply embedded in the ancient Vedic and Upanishadic literatures which represents a sophisticated, non-materialist tradition that conceptualizes the human being as a multifaceted spiritual entity. Rather than emerging from a purely mechanistic or behavioural paradigm, Upanishadic psychology is grounded in first-person experiential phenomenology, contemplative science, and the systematic investigation of subjective states of consciousness.

The historical evolution of psychological concepts in India shows a seamless transition from the foundational devotional hymns of the Vedas to the highly internalized philosophical discourses of the Upanishads. In the Rig Veda, early reflections on the mind focus on its phenomenal velocity (the "speed of the mind")[25], the cultivation of noble thoughts to prevent emotional distress, and the inherent healing capacities of mental concentration. The Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda advance this inquiry by conceptualizing the mind (manas) as the fundamental basis of individual consciousness, an "inner flame of knowledge," and a powerful instrument capable of psychological suggestion[26]. These foundational texts demonstrate a keen awareness of psychopathology, detailing emotional states such as chronic grief, envy, attachment, hostility, and lethargy, while classifying severe delusional states of psychosis termed as Unmada.

The Upanishads, also known as Vedanta, internalize these concepts, shifting the focus from external ritualism to direct, introspective inquiry into the true nature of the Self (Atman) and its identity with the ultimate, non-dual substratum of reality (Brahman). In doing so, Upanishadic psychodynamics offers a profound alternative to the "Hard Problem of Consciousness" that challenges contemporary Western cognitive science. Rather than viewing consciousness as an emergent by-product of neural processes, the Upanishads assert that consciousness is ontologically primary. Within this transpersonal framework, the physical brain and body do not generate awareness; instead, they function as a localized, biological filter or interface that channels a pervasive, nonlocal consciousness into the constraints of physical, space-time existence. Consequently, psychological suffering is understood not merely as a localized cognitive or biochemical malfunction, but as an ontological misalignment: a profound state of identity confusion (avidya) wherein the localized ego misidentifies itself with its physical and mental instruments, forgetting its unconditioned, transcendent nature.

The Upanishads present a model of consciousness that is multidimensional, distinguishing between the waking, dream, and deep sleep states, and positing a fourth transcendental state, Turiya. This nuanced view suggests an early understanding of altered states of consciousness and the potential for inner transformation. By analysing the scriptural descriptions of these states, one can glean insights into the Upanishadic perspective on mental discipline, meditation, and the pursuit of a stable, integrated self, often referred to as achieving a balanced mind. Here are key Upanishadic quotes that illustrate principles of psychodynamics, such as the structure of the mind, desire-driven motivation, and the conflict between short-term pleasure and long-term well-being. The Upanishads contain profound insights into human psychology, describing the internal forces, conflicts, and layers of the human mind centuries before modern psychology (Muller, 1978).

The passage from the Katha Upanishad[27] serves as an ancient model of the psyche, closely mirroring Sigmund Freud's structural model of the Id, Ego, and Superego in Chariot Allegory. Which is read as "*"Know the Self (Atman) as the master of the chariot, and the body as the chariot. Know the intellect (Buddhi) as the charioteer, and the mind (Manas) as the reins. The senses they say are the horses, and the objects of the senses are the paths".* The horses (senses/Id) represent raw instinctual drives pushing for gratification. The reins (mind) process sensory data. The charioteer (intellect/Ego) must use willpower and reason to control these impulses and guide the psyche safely. On the contrary, The Katha Upanishad[28] highlights the perpetual internal conflict between immediate impulse gratification and higher psychological growth. *"The good (Shreyas) and the pleasant (Preyas) both approach man. Examining them from all sides, the wise man discriminates between the two. The wise chooses the good over the pleasant, while the foolish chooses the pleasant out of greed and attachment."* This text describes the tension between the Pleasure Principle (seeking instant gratification via *Preyas*) and the Reality Principle (postponing gratification for long-term psychological maturity via *Shreyas*). The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad outlines the causal chain of human behaviour, explaining how deep-seated, unconscious desires shape our reality[29] which is read as *"You are what your deep, driving desire is. As your desire is, so is your will. As your will is, so is your deed. As your deed is, so is your destiny."* According to this text behaviour is not accidental. It is driven by *Kama* (unconscious or conscious desire), which shapes our intentions and actions. This anticipates the psychological concept of motivation and behavioural conditioning. The Mandukya Upanishad maps out the human mind into four distinct states of consciousness, recognizing that the waking mind is only the surface of the psyche.

- *Jagrat* (Waking state): Outward-moving consciousness, experiencing the material world.
- *Svapna* (Dream state): Inward-moving consciousness, processing desires, fears, and latent impressions (*Samskaras*).
- *Sushupti* (Deep sleep): Undifferentiated consciousness, free from desire, where the ego temporarily dissolves.
- *Turiya* (The Self): Pure, absolute consciousness underlying all states.

This framework directly relates to the concept of the conscious mind (*Jagrat*), the subconscious processing of unfulfilled desires through dream (*Svapna*), and the deepest unconscious layers of the psyche.

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad explains the root cause of psychological anxiety and defence mechanisms which is read as *"Fear arises only from a sense of duality (the existence of a second)."*[30] The Anxiety and fear are born when the mind separates itself from others, viewing the external world as a threat. This separation leads to ego-defence mechanisms like projection and displacement to cope with the "other."

Furthermore, the Upanishads' emphasis on karma and reincarnation provides a framework for understanding motivations and consequences on a psychological level. The idea that actions have repercussions, shaping future experiences, encourages a proactive approach to mental cultivation and ethical conduct. A research paper could investigate how these concepts, when viewed through a modern psychodynamic lens, offer timeless wisdom on personal responsibility and the continuous development of the inner self, fostering growth throughout life.

The concept of Mind-Body Continuum in AyurVeda: Ayu, Antahkarana, and Panchakosha

To map the psychophysical framework of human existence, Upanishadic and Vedantic thought establishes an integrated model of the mind-body complex, later systematized within the medical traditions of Ayurveda. In the Caraka Samhita, life (Ayu) is defined as a dynamic, inseparable combination of the physical body (Shareera), the sensory-motor apparatus (Indriya), the psyche (Satva), and the transcendent soul (Atma)[31]. The psyche provides direction to the senses, controls the self, and executes rational deliberation, operating through a subtle internal psychological organ known as the Antahkarana.

The Antahkarana operates within the subtle body (Suksma Sarira) and is composed of four highly integrated functional components. This internal system coordinates raw sensory data, refers those perceptions to a subjective identity, stores latent memories, and executes discriminative willpower.

Discussion

The dynamic flow of human awareness through this mental apparatus is structurally organized across five concentric envelopes or sheaths, known as the Panchakosha, as detailed in the Taittiriya Upanishad. These sheaths represent a continuous spectrum of energy and awareness, extending from the grossest material layer to the subtlest transpersonal dimension.

- Annamaya Kosha or The Physical Sheath: The physical, anatomical structure of the body, formed and sustained by anna (food). It anchors the psychological self in physical reality and is localized anatomically,

with the Upanishads noting that the underlying Atman pervades the entire physical structure, extending even to the extremities such as the tips of the nails[32] .

- Pranamaya Kosha or The Vital Air Sheath: The energetic field sustained by prana (bioenergy), which regulates physiological homeostatic functions such as respiration, circulation, and metabolism. The sub-energy Udana is of particular psychodynamic importance, as it acts to push the individual consciousness into states of somnambulism and sleep, and facilitates the separation of the vital, subtle body from the physical body at the moment of death.
- Manomaya Kosha or The Mental-Emotional Sheath: The mental envelope nourished by education, cultural conditioning, and sensory habits. It is the seat of linear thoughts, desires, and conditioned emotional patterns like anger, greed, and jealousy.
- Vijnanamaya Kosha or The Intellectual-Discriminative Sheath: The envelope of intellect and wisdom, nourished by the ego (as an organizing principle of agency and identity) and rational discernment. It represents the locus of free will, ethical judgment, and deep self-reflection, standing as the bridge between personal ego-identity and spiritual awareness.
- Anandamaya Kosha or The Bliss Sheath: The subtlest causal sheath, nourished by emotions in their purest, unconditioned state, such as aesthetic delight, spiritual joy, and profound contentment (ananda). It is the layer closest to the unconditioned Atman.

Upanishadic psychodynamics posits that psychological disorders originate from imbalances or structural splits across these sheaths. For instance, a person who focuses exclusively on the Annamaya Kosha while neglecting their emotional and spiritual sheaths inevitably suffers from somatic burnout, existential emptiness, and deep-seated anxiety. When emotional conflicts in the Manomaya Kosha remain unresolved, they block the energetic pathways of the Pranamaya Kosha, ultimately precipitating physiological diseases in the physical body. Thus, comprehensive healing requires interventions that address every layer of the continuum through somatic regulation, breath control (pranayama), cognitive restructuring, and transpersonal meditation.

Temperamental Dynamics: The Triguna and Prakriti Frameworks

The Upanishadic and Ayurvedic models of personality classify individual differences in temperament, motivation, and psychopathology through the theory of the three Gunas—fundamental qualities of nature (prakriti) that continuously shape the human mind. Unlike Western trait-based personality theories (such as the Big Five) which often view personality as a static, biologically determined set of behaviours, the Triguna framework conceptualizes personality as a dynamic, transformable field of conscious energy.

The three Gunas—Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas—operate in a state of constant, dynamic tension, modulating cognitive clarity, emotional reactivity, and psychological inertia.

- Sattva (Purity, Harmony, and Clarity): Characterized by self-control, mental calmness, compassion, intellectual discrimination, and a profound desire for self-knowledge. It is associated with the parasympathetic nervous system, high vagal tone, and coherent alpha-wave activity in the brain, fostering a stable, ethical, and contemplative baseline.
- Rajas (Activity, Passion, and Restlessness): Characterized by dynamic energy, intense ambition, emotional volatility, competitive drive, and ego-centric desire. It is linked to sympathetic nervous system arousal, heightened dopaminergic reward-seeking behavior, and goal-oriented anxiety.
- Tamas (Inertia, Darkness, and Delusion): Characterized by mental lethargy, ignorance, confusion, chronic procrastination, and psychological resistance. It corresponds with reduced cortical arousal, excessive default mode network hyperactivity, and severe motivational deficits.

The permutations and combinations of these three operational qualities yield 21 distinct personality types in classical Ayurvedic psychology. These psychological types intersect with the three somatic humors (Tridoshas: Vata, Pitta, and Kapha) to constitute an individual's Prakriti—their unique baseline psychophysical constitution.

Conclusion:

Thus, In tracing the lineage of Western psychodynamics—from Sigmund Freud's structural model of the mind to Carl Jung's analytical psychology—one finds a profound, often undercurrent debt to the metaphysical framework of the Upanishads. What the West eventually codified as the "unconscious," the "ego," and the "psyche," ancient Vedic seers had already mapped millennia earlier through the concepts of Atman (the true Self), Ahamkara, and Maya (the illusion of separation). The philosophical bridge was largely built by Arthur Schopenhauer, who famously found solace in the Upanishads. His concept of the "Will": a blind, striving cosmic force that drives human behaviour:

directly anticipated Freud's concept of the Id and the pleasure principle. Through this philosophical lineage, the Upanishadic understanding of desire (Kama) as the binding force of human conditioning was secularized into Western drive theory.

Where Freud saw the unconscious as a basement of repressed desires, Carl Jung saw it as a spiritual matrix. Jung's concept of the collective unconscious and the process of individuation heavily mirror the Upanishadic quest to look past the superficial ego to realize the universal Self. Jung essentially validated Western psychology's need for an ultimate unifying principle, a concept central to Advaita Vedanta.

5. Further Discussion

Thus, both psychodynamics and the Upanishads operate as technologies of unmasking. Psychotherapy aiming to dismantle the defence mechanisms and neuroses that distort a patient's reality. Similarly, the Upanishads demand the piercing of Maya—the cognitive illusion of duality—to alleviate human suffering. The Upanishads did not merely anticipate Western psychodynamics; they provided an ancient blueprint for it. By shifting the search for the divine from external deities to the interiority of human consciousness, the Upanishads paved the way for depth psychology. The modern clinical journey into the unconscious is, in many ways, a Western, secularized echo of the ancient Vedic declaration: Tat Tvam Asi (That Thou Art)—the realization that the answers to the cosmos lie within the layers of the self.

Ultimately, the psychodynamics of the Upanishads do not seek to build a "healthy ego" merely to adjust to an illusory world, but rather to reveal that the individual is already fundamentally whole, luminous, and free. This ancient, non-dual paradigm offers contemporary clinical psychology a profound path toward genuine healing, transforming to a sacred awakening to the universal spirit within; a definite path to the therapeutic journey from a struggle with psychological pathology.

Need of the hour is that these texts should be thoroughly be comprehended in a more meaningful way.

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[5] Ish.Upanishad15 & 16
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[27] Katha Upanishad (1.3.3–4)
[28] Katha Upanishad (1.2.1–2)
[29] Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (4.4.5)
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