

# EXPLORING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPTS THROUGH THE LENS OF UPANISHADS

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## Abstract

The Upanishads constitute the concluding portions or the summary of Vedas. Hence they are called Vedanta (end of Veda). Upanishads laid the foundation for various philosophical systems that developed in India. The three most famous Vedanta systems still prevalent in India are Advaita, Dvaita and Vishishtadvaita, which had borrowed the ideologies from the important Upanishads. Upanishads are key texts that helped to develop and grow Samakya, Yoga, Mimamsa, Buddhism, and Jainism. Bhagavat Gita explains the ideas that are mentioned in Upanishads. The Upanishads do not advocate any one single doctrine. The Upanishadic seers were the foremost in their age in the philosophical reflection in the general and psychological reflection in particular. One can find similarities when comparing the psychological ideas of the Upanishads to the Western theories. Upanishads talk about the theory of consciousness, Humanistic theory, Existential and Logo therapies, Positive Psychology, and even Abnormal Psychology. This paper analyzes various Upanishadic scriptures and explains the above mentioned psychological concepts hidden in Upanishad texts.

**Keywords:** Upanishads, Psychology, Consciousness, Positive Psychology, Humanistic theory, Pancha Kosha theory, Existential and Logo Therapies and Abnormal Psychology.

## Introduction

With all its latest development in technology and science, Humankind has grown manifold with the outer world. However, its growth towards understanding the inner self and attaining self-actualization is still at a significantly slower pace. To find a way to develop oneself and attain self-actualization or the self-realization of oneself has been the central idea of Upanishads.

Upanishad is derived from the etymology that describes Upa – near, Ni – down, and sad – to sit, which means sitting near the guru. Upanishad was taught to a group of selected students who sat near the teacher and learned the secrets of life explained from various doctrines. Upanishads are also called "Vedanta,

" meaning the "end of the Vedas". It also means it is the culmination of the Vedic thought.

The Upanishads differ from the Vedic literature in terms of form also. Many of the Upanishads are in dialogue – the dialogue between teacher and student. Dialogue indicates discussion. Mukhya or important Upanishads like Katha Upanishad, Brihadaharanyka Upanishad, Taittiriyo Upanishad, Isavasaya Upanishad and all others are the dialogues or discussions between sages or enlightened souls and the kings or students who wanted to learn more about inner self. These discussions help one understand life's more significant meaning and how to connect oneself to a higher existence. The conversation between Ajathasathru and Gargi, Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi, King Janaka and Yajnavalkya and Gargi, Yama and

Nachikethu, and Svethakethu and his father Aruni are a few examples that are scattered in various Mukhya Upanishads.

The solution or the key to all the questions for higher knowledge can be found in Upanishad. The knowledge that a person attains from Upanishad quenches the inner thirst one has for attaining a higher state of Consciousness. It helps to recognize the true nature of all existence. There needs to be a balance between the knowledge one attains through inner search with the outer world. Upanishads help humankind maintain this balance by providing an understanding and the importance of the Self, which is deeply hidden inside each human being.

The Indian sacred texts like Vedas and Upanishads lay importance on the concept of Self. Self is treated as a separate thing in Western Philosophy, whereas it is the central concept of almost all ancient Indian texts. The Indian Philosophy places Upanishads as a significant source of understanding and how to reach Atman. The inward-looking attitude of the Upanishad had always helped humankind in its quest to find the truth of one. The thoughtful way of Upanishad is deemed to be a bit more advanced than the outward-looking nature of Vedas. Each Upanishad represents any of the four Vedas, thereby explaining the profound truths hidden in that Veda with an inner looking attitude.

Upanishad's shift to this inward-looking attitude from the outward-looking attitude of Vedas without disturbing the connection with the reality of the outer world is the most outstanding achievement of the seers. They combined the psychic experience of the inner world with the scientific phenomena of the outer world.

This combination has given a scientific understanding between the Atman or the divine and the human and his inner side. The above correlation can be explained through an example from Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. It compares the Atman inside a man to the light of the Sun and mentions it to be the same. Such correlation helps one understand the connectivity between the inner nature and the outer world. Upanishads advocate that the inner self of man houses the ultimate truth. This is the core idea of the Upanishads.

Consciousness theory as explained in Upanishads:

Modern Science does not find a meaningful way to explain Consciousness and its relation to the existence of human beings. There will be no sense or knowledge if Consciousness does not exist as it helps a human being to understand himself. As Cornelissen.M, 2021 has mentioned in his article "Consciousness as the foundation of psychology", how Kaushitaki Upanishad explains this concept very clearly as follows:

"Matter or object is related to spirit or subject, and the subject or spirit is equally related to the object or matter. If there were no object, there would be no subject, and if there were no subject, there would be no object, for, on either side alone, nothing could be achieved."

Upanishads, Buddhism and Samkhya schools in Indian Philosophy had given significant place to Consciousness and had explained in detail the ways of achieving pure Consciousness. It is the essential feature of Upanishads particularly.

Consciousness is based on an individual's experience rather than a speculative process (Cornelissen.M, 2021). We can find it as Sat, Chit, Ananda, Atman or Brahman in Upanishads. All mukhya Upanishads had explained this concept of Consciousness. Nevertheless, Consciousness has been described in detail in Mandukya Upanishad. It explains Consciousness in four states. The first state is the waking or ordinary state, known as Jagrat. The second state is the dream state mentioned as the Svapna state. The third state of Consciousness is known as deep sleep, mentioned as Sushupthi, and the fourth state is the highest state of Consciousness, known as the Turiya or the transcendental state (Samadhi).

Chandhogya Upanishad mentions Indra learning about these three states of Consciousness, thereby understanding the difference between each state of Consciousness. The first two states of Consciousness are realized through the physical state, whereas the Sushupthi state of Consciousness is easily distinguishable from the senses and mind.

The first three states of Consciousness can be experienced by people relatively easily in their day to day life. However, the fourth or Turiya state, is hard to achieve, and it has no connection with the finite mind (Prabhavananda, Swami, 1977, as cited by Durga TK., et al., 2018). Taittiriyo Upanishad explains this state as present in the Anandamaya Kosha, the fifth sheath of the koshas, closer to the eternal Self, present in the human body.

When a person attains this transcendental state of Consciousness, he is freed from cycles of birth and death, rebirth and attains knowledge and eternal bliss, which is confirmed in the Brihadaranyaka, Kena, Chandogya and Katha Upanishad. They also mention that Consciousness is the ultimate solution for realizing the Self, which is within oneself. According to Taittiriya Upanishad, Consciousness is the primal source of life. This Consciousness is manifested as intelligence, which manifests as the body, mind and breath. Hence one is doomed to be in avidhya and darkness and suffer from birth cycles if he does not understand Consciousness and realize his inner Self.

#### Upanishads and Humanistic Psychology:

Western World has proposed a few theories to explain the concept of self-actualization. Maslow's need hierarchy theory is one of the foremost in the Western psychological world to come up with a holistic view of combining the physical and psychological aspects in the growth of a human being. Following Maslow, Carl Rogers 1986 mentioned that implementing a person-centred approach in the counselling sessions will bring out a person's natural tendency to move towards self-actualization or grow to the fullest potential. (Sathyaseelan A & Sathyaseelan.B., 2016).

Abraham Maslow's contribution to motivational psychology is phenomenal. His holistic way of connecting and showing the interrelatedness between the physical and psychological attributes in achieving the highest potential or self-actualization of a human being is wholesome. In the Pancha Kosha Theory, such a holistic view of achieving self-actualization is mentioned in Taittiriyo Upanishad (the oldest Upanishad). The western theories had failed miserably to

explain the urge or effort of a human being to attain self-actualization. Only the Upanishads help one to gain insight into this wonderful process.

The outer layer is the Annamaya Kosha which is made of the physical nature of the body. It is the gross or the lower state of the Kosha. It is explained in the form of five sheaths that encloses the Atman or Self. The physical needs of the body are being satisfied through this sheath. It also serves as a carrier of five senses or the "indriyas" through which a man enjoys this worldly pleasure. This sheath is also connected to human life's birth, growth, death and decay. Annamaya Kosha is treated as the gross or the lower state of Consciousness. This can be compared to Maslow's lower need in the hierarchy as the "need to satisfy the Physiological needs like food, water, air and so on. Upanishad treats this Annamaya Kosha as a sacrifice pit for the Self, deep inside the sheaths. Upanishads and Maslow's Hierarchy Theory mention that satisfying this level is very important for a person to move to the next level.

The second sheath is Pranmaya Kosha which is connected to the breath of air. Life does not sustain if no air is present. Hence this sheath is the energy or life-giver to the whole body. This is slightly considered a higher state of Consciousness than the Annamaya Kosha. This sheath is made up of five Pranas or air named as Praana, Apaana, Udaana, Vyaana and Samaana. This sheath enables the five organs of action or the karma indriyas.

Upanishads associate this sheath with emotions and feelings. Upanishads also mention that this sheath forms the connection or link between the body and mind. When one mediates with prana as a central object, he can experience happiness, liberty and strength.

Maslow's second hierarchical level speaks about safety, mainly about personal securities like employment, health, property and resources. As air provides safety to the inner organs, Maslow's second level is compared to this Pranamaya Kosha.

The third level, the mental sheath, is the Manomaya Kosha. It is what Upanishads describe as Mind or rightly be mentioned as "Manas". Though the definition of Manas is different from Mind as there is no correct word

to describe Manas in English, the mind is being substituted here. The Manas or the Mind is the emotional part of the body. The perceptions of one are formulated through this area. All the information collected through the five sense organs and the organs of action are being processed at this point, and the knowledge and thinking are formed. Manas is also where all thoughts, doubts, lust, depression, perception, jealousy and anger originate ( Raina, KM).

Manas is the sheath that deals with emotions through the Pranamaya Kosha and controls all the organs within the body. This sheath is associated with love, harmony, compassion and happiness (Sri Aurobindo). This sheath is considered a little closer to the inner Self, and through this Manas, a man sees the outer world and gains knowledge to find the connection between nature and Self. If one can control his Manas and train it to look inwards rather than outwards, he is said to attain Consciousness about SELF.

Maslow's third level speaks about love, commitment, family and a sense of joy which relates to the physical extensions of Manas. According to Upanishads, one can train or control Manas through Prana, which is the second sheath. Maslow advocates that unless the first two lower levels of needs are met, it is hard to reach the third level.

The fourth level or sheath in Kosha theory is the Vignanamaya Kosha or the "Knowledge Sheath". According to Upanishads, this is called the 'buddhi', which constitutes intelligence, knowledge and will. This is the human will's main seat, which makes him turn or take the right path even when surrounded by a bad environment. The human will is the centre of Western therapies like Logotherapy and Existential Therapy. This will steer a man towards the gross bodily experiences and enjoyment of experiencing spiritual awareness and realization. Hence it is the centre of judgments and decisions and differentiates between good and evil. Upanishads words this knowledge or will as the "intuition".

Maslow argues that when all the three lower levels of need hierarchy are achieved, then man moves towards the need for respect, recognition, self-esteem and freedom. When the awareness of inner strength is achieved, the above requirements or needs are easily

satisfied. This is following the fourth or the Vignanamaya Kosha of Kosha theory.

The fifth sheath is the Anandamaya Kosha, or the innermost sheath, which encloses the Atman. It is also called the Sheath of Bliss. It is described in pure white colour. This is the highest dimension a man can achieve. This bliss state or permanent happiness is possible when one transcends all the previous sheaths or layers. In this state, Consciousness is very high that a person detaches himself from all types of emotions and balances his mind and body perfectly (Raina, MK). The mind, which is in harmony with the body and the surroundings, provides the inner strength required to have unshakable self-confidence and permanent happiness, face life with fearlessness and reach the highest potential.

According to Maslow, when a man still satisfies all four levels, there seems to be some restlessness or unhappiness until he finds his individuality and carries with that action. Maslow calls "integrated creativity" from which "comes the great work of art, or philosophy or science" (Maslow, 1968, p. 142, cited by Raina. MK). This state of need is called self-actualization.

However, Maslow's hierarchy of needs stops here. It does not delve deep into the concept of Self or identify oneself with his inner core. Upanishads deeply discuss the Atman or the inner Self and how one can unite with the Ultimate or the Soul. Thus understanding Kosha theory helps identify the human mind with its deepest core of bliss and happiness that can be obtained through dhyana and meditation.

The Pancha Kosha theory from Upanishads had taught man to attain his self-transcendence over many thousands of years. Pancha Kosha's theory is now used in alternative and complementary medicines and is also used to study well-being, happiness and quality of life (Kumar. K, 2011).

Upanishads and Positive Psychology:

One can find many similarities between the teachings of ancient Indian scriptures and Positive Psychology. The root of Indian Psychology is based on well-being and positivity. Upanishadic seers defined the nature of happiness as a permanent one based on

explaining the harmonious connection between one's inner self and nature. The recent growth of positive psychology seems to be manifold due to its focus on building positive well-being rather than concentrating on the pathological problems of the mind. Positive psychology concentrates on the positive aspects of life like happiness, satisfaction, well-being and flourishing.

Upanishads speak of the permanent Happiness (Nithya) than the temporary one (anithya). Upanishads' main quest was to understand and achieve this permanent happiness that is everlasting and constant. They explained this concept of well-being and ananda through connecting nature and one's inner self. This inner self is what they defined as "Atman" or "Brahman". This Atman was defined as the ultimate truth not bound by time or place. It is defined to be existing everywhere and permanently in our inner Self.

According to Upanishads, one can escape from the misery of rebirth and sorrows by realizing this Atman, which leads to permanent happiness (bliss).

Taittiriyo Upanishad speaks about five sheaths which encompass the Atman and the nature of each sheath in its Pancha Kosha Theory. In that, it advocates for a man to overcome the gross or the lower three sheaths and reach the Anandamaya Kosha, the highest state of Consciousness. The presence of one in the Annamaya Kosha is just the 'being', whereas when one transcends to the first Kosha, the Anandamaya Kosha, he is said to be in 'well-being'.

When connecting these sheaths parallelly to the Western Psychological concepts, each sheath represents each level of awareness one undergoes in his journey of searching for his inner self (Salagme. KK, 2003). Upanishads equate happiness not with the external environment but with the inner Self. This state of happiness or bliss is always characterized by positivity. This state of positivity is not affected by any outward agents. When one attains this state of self-transcendence, he liberates himself from fear, limitations, and psychological states that affect well-being and all bodily and mental attachments. Thus one can find many references and teachings about well-being and

positive psychological concepts in our ancient Vedic and Upanishad scriptures.

Upanishads and Abnormal Psychology:

Upanishads discuss all the problems under the Sun through dialogues, stories and discourses between the guru and the student, the sage and the king, the rishi and his wife, the Gods and humans, and the two sages and so on. It is very interesting to note that one can find solutions to prevalent problems even now in this modern world. That was the height of wisdom of the Upanishadic sages and seers.

In Katha Upanishad, a small boy Nachiketa questions Yama, the Lord of death, about what happens to a person after death? Where does his soul go? Initially, Lord Yama refused to answer these questions weighing the boy's age and the knowledge he was trying to seek. However, finally, he gave in and answered all these questions, which are not only for Nachiketa but for every human being to understand what is death and what happens after death. The same question is being discussed between the sage Javali and his student Svetaketu in Chandhogya Upanishad. Briharadharanya Upanishad questions, "When a tree is cut down, a new one springs out from the previous root; then what is the root in a man's life which helps to spring up again, even when he is cut down by death?" (Paramahamsa, KR).

Upanishad also speaks about the questions about dreams and sleep. It explains what happens during sleep, the states of dreams, and how it is connected to Consciousness.

Brihadharanyaka Upanishad explains sleep like a bird resting in its nest after flying high in the sky for a long time. In this state, man has no desires or dreams (Paramahamsa KR). Brihadharanyaka Upanishad explains the physical state of sleep more elaborately. Sleep is also discussed in Prashna Upanishad. It states that when there is no impression in the mind, and it is in a very relaxed state of happiness, then that state is termed deep sleep. This is also mentioned in Chandhogya Upanishad also speaks about sleep more in terms of physiological processes. It mentions that when the mind is merged with the breath, Praana, sleep occurs.

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad states that it is like a fish which moves from this bank to the other; man moves between the dream state and sleep state, forming an intermediate state between unconsciousness and Consciousness (Paramahansa KR). Prashna Upanishad also discusses dream and mentions that it is a state of mind where it reconstructs the experiences of the day or even from a past birth, real or unreal and thereby enjoys such reconstructions (Muller, Max). It is the replica of actual experiences.

### Conclusion:

The Upanishadic sages and seers understood human nature and were concerned about the well-being of the human being. Hence they came up with solutions to many mental issues and also to attain the permanent bliss or state of permanent ananda. They acted like modern therapists and guides and helped people through their wise texts. All the problems under the Sun are discussed in the Upanishads, with the solutions given in a bit cryptic language.

The central teaching of the Upanishad is the connection between the small (Jiva) to the big (Atman). It teaches the connection that exists between self and inner Self. It explains in detail the problems created due to the ignorance of not understanding the Atman, which is hidden inside each individual. It also shows the path to reach the Atman, attain Moksha, and be relieved from the sorrows of rebirth. Upanishad also advocates the harmony between mind, body and soul and the ways to achieve this balance.

Upanishads are the texts that teach humans to look inner side rather than to view the pleasures of the outer world. It also explains the connection between the cosmic or the universe to the individual. Thus Upanishads are the treasure house of knowledge which needs to be churned often to understand self-actualization and self-transcendence and attain man's true potential. This paper is an attempt to bring out few western psychological concepts that are present in our Upanishads. Future researchers can still delve deep into the Upanishads and find many more such theories and concepts which will help for indigenization process of psychology.

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