

The Path of Knowledge and the Depths of the Psyche: Jñānayoga through a Psychoanalytic Lens

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Abstract

This paper explores the philosophical depth of Jñānayoga, the "Path of Knowledge," as presented in the Bhagavad Gītā and its intriguing parallels with psychoanalytic theories of the human psyche. Jñānayoga is a transformative journey of self-inquiry, guiding individuals to discern between the transient (body, mind, ego) and the eternal (Ātman, the true self). Lord Krishna's distinction between the "field" (kṣetra) and the "knower of the field" (kṣetrajña) offers a framework for understanding the self beyond material existence, echoing psychoanalytic insights into the layers of human consciousness.

Drawing from Freudian and post-Freudian perspectives, this paper examines the intersections between the unconscious mind and the spiritual quest for ultimate knowledge. It argues that while psychoanalysis seeks self-awareness through introspection and uncovering repressed desires, Jñānayoga aspires to transcend the ego altogether, leading to self-realization and liberation (mokṣa). Furthermore, the study highlights the necessity of integrating wisdom with humility, detachment, and ethical living, demonstrating how Jñānayoga complements other yogic paths like Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga.

By juxtaposing Eastern metaphysical insights with Western psychological frameworks, this paper offers a comparative analysis of how both traditions address the fundamental question: Who am I? The discussion ultimately underscores the relevance of Jñānayoga not only as a spiritual discipline but also as a profound philosophical and psychological method for understanding the depths of human consciousness.

Key Words: *Jñānayoga, Bhagavad Gītā, Self-knowledge, Ātman, Psychoanalysis, Unconscious mind, Ego, Kṣetra and Kṣetrajña, Mokṣa (liberation), Western psychology, Freudian theory, Self-inquiry, Spiritual wisdom, Transcendence and self-realization.*

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Indian philosophy is deeply embedded in the Vedic and Upaniṣadic thoughts, providing the foundational grounds for all the Indian Philosophical Schools. The philosophical landscape is broadly divided into Orthodox (*Āstika*) and Heterodox (*Nāstika*) traditions based on their acceptance of the Vedas as the authentic source of knowledge. The six Orthodox (*ṣaḍdarśana*) schools—Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta—accept the authority of the Vedas, whereas the Heterodox schools—Cārvāka, Bauddha (Buddhist), and Jaina (Jain)—reject it. Among these, Vedānta and Yoga school play a crucial role in the spiritual discourse of India, particularly concerning self-realization and liberation (*mokṣa*).

Yoga, often misunderstood in the contemporary world as mere physical postures (*āsanas*), is a profound philosophical system. ‘Yoga’ originates from the Sanskrit root ‘*yuj*’, meaning² "to unite" or "to join." In its highest sense, yoga refers to the union of the *jīvātman* (individual self) with the *paramātman* (supreme self). Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* outlines an eightfold path (*Aṣṭāṅga Yoga*), emphasizing ethical discipline, meditation, and self-realization. However, beyond the systematized Yoga school, the broader Vedic tradition speaks of mainly three principal paths of yoga: Jñānayoga (the path of knowledge), Bhaktiyoga (the path of devotion), and Karmayoga (the path of action). Yoga considers that bondage is due to non-discrimination (*aviveka*) between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, and liberation is due to discrimination (*viveka*) between them.

Nevertheless, Yoga philosophy states that the mind consists of four dimensions. *Buddhi* (intellect) is the reasoning faculty that relies on memory and data, limiting its ability to go beyond what is already known. *Manas* (cellular memory) is an intelligence present throughout the body, storing ancestral memory but functioning differently from the intellect. *Ahankara* (identity/ego) shapes how the intellect operates, as it is bound by personal and social identities, restricting broader perception. *Chitta* (pure intelligence) is the highest dimension, independent of memory, connecting to cosmic intelligence and serving as the foundation of consciousness. Additionally, consciousness itself has four states: *Jagrut* (wakefulness), *Swapna* (dream), *Suṣupti* (dreamless sleep), and *Turīya* (super consciousness).

² Ardent Flame. (2024). *International Yoga Day 2024: Discover the power of yoga!* [Web story]. <https://ardentflame.co.in/web-stories/celebrate-international-yoga-day-2024-discover-the-power-of-yoga/>

Besides the fivefold Yama viz., ahimsā, satya, asteya, brahmacarya, and aparigraha, the Bhāgavad Gītā includes another seven, namely, asaṅga or non-attachment, hrī or look down upon what is not prescribed by the sastras, āstikya or piety, mauna or silence, sthairya or patience, kṣamā or forgiveness, and abhaya or fearlessness, which purifies our mind.³

Jñānayoga, the path of knowledge, is the most abstract and intellectually demanding of the three. It involves rigorous self-inquiry (*ātma-vicāra*) and direct cognition of the ultimate reality, as propounded in the Upaniṣads and later systematized in Advaita Vedānta by Śaṅkarācārya. Jñānayoga is primarily a path of wisdom, where knowledge (*jñāna*) serves as the fire that burns away ignorance. Serving as the core of jnana yoga, knowledge flames away as the spiritual fire, the taints of action in the mind⁴ (P178). The *Bhagavad Gītā* provides a detailed exposition of Jñānayoga, particularly in its fourth chapter, where Kṛṣṇa declares that the sacrifice of knowledge (*jñānayajña*) is superior to material sacrifice (*dravyayajña*). Thus, in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (4.33), Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna:

śreyān dravyamayād yajñāj jñānayajñaḥ parantapa
sarvaṁ karmākhilam pārtha jñāne parisamāpyate I⁵

This verse translates as:

"O Arjuna, the sacrifice of knowledge is superior to material sacrifice. All actions culminate in knowledge."

Here, Kṛṣṇa emphasizes that external rituals (*yajña*) remain superficial unless accompanied by deep self-awareness. Jñānayoga aims at transcending the illusion of separation between the individual and the Absolute (*Brahman*). This illusion, *avidyā* (ignorance), is the fundamental cause of suffering. The Advaita Vedānta tradition, particularly Śaṅkara's philosophy, affirms that liberation (*mokṣa*) is attained through the realization of non-duality (*Advaita*), where the *jīvātman* and *Brahman* are understood as the same.

³ "Ahimsā satyamasteyamasāṅgao hīrasaṁcayaḥ I Āstikyambrahmacaryamca mounam stairya kṣamābhayam II" Bhattacharya, S. (1982). *The philosophy of the Śrīmad-Bhāgavata* (p. 189). Mahes Library.

⁴ Bhattacharya, S. (1982). *The philosophy of the Śrīmad-Bhāgavata* (p. 178). Mahes Library.

⁵ Bhāgavad Gītā 4/33.

The Upaniṣadic phrase “Tat Tvam Asi”⁶ (“Thou Art That”) encapsulates the essence of Jñānayoga. It suggests that the seeker (*sādhaka*) must look within to realize that their true nature is not different from the ultimate reality. This inward journey is profoundly psychological and resonates with modern psychoanalytic explorations of the self.

In the modern era, psychoanalysis offers a fascinating parallel to Jñānayoga. While rooted in different epistemological frameworks, both traditions emphasize ignorance's transcendence and the fragmented self's integration. Freudian psychoanalysis focuses on uncovering repressed unconscious material, while Jungian psychology highlights individuation—the process of integrating the unconscious and conscious self. This paper explores the intersections between Jñānayoga and psychoanalysis, arguing that both paths ultimately aim at self-liberation through deep self-awareness.

Psychoanalysis, developed by Sigmund Freud, offers profound insights into human consciousness, particularly its distinction between the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious. He has developed a psychoanalytic framework that seeks to understand human behavior, personality, and the unconscious mind. Central to Freud's theory is the structural tripartite model of the psyche, consisting of the id, ego, superego (Freud, 1923). The id represents innate, primitive desires driven by the pleasure principle, seeking immediate gratification. The ego, functioning under the reality principle, mediates between the id and external reality, ensuring socially acceptable behavior. The superego, shaped by internalized societal and parental values, enforces morality and generates guilt when one acts against these values (Freud, 1930). These three components are in constant conflict, influencing individual behaviour and mental health.⁷ Freud argued that much of human behavior is influenced by unconscious drives, many of which are repressed due to societal norms.⁸ He posited that much human behavior is driven by unconscious desires and repressed memories, which create suffering without awareness.⁹

⁶ Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7.

⁷ Freud, S. (1960). *The ego and the id* (J. Riviere, Trans., pp. 12–17). W. W. Norton & Company.

⁸ Freud, S. (1953). *The interpretation of dreams* (Vols. 4–5, pp. 564–565; Standard ed.). Hogarth Press.

⁹ Grapeshot MQ. (n.d.). *Pop culture rewind: Who and what is Freud?* <https://www.grapeshotmq.com.au/post/who-and-what-is-freud>

His theory of psychosexual development outlines five stages—oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital—each shaping personality in distinct ways.¹⁰ Additionally, Freud introduced the concept of dream analysis, considering dreams as symbolic expressions of repressed desires.¹¹ Another key aspect of Freudian thought is defence mechanisms, such as repression, projection, and denial, which help the psyche cope with anxiety.¹² Despite criticism for its lack of empirical validation, Freudian psychoanalysis has profoundly influenced literature, philosophy, and cultural studies, inspiring thinkers like Jacques Lacan and Jean-Paul Sartre.¹³

On the other hand, Jñānayoga, or the path of knowledge, is one of the key spiritual paths in Hindu philosophy, particularly within Advaita Vedānta. It emphasizes self-inquiry and the realization of Brahman, the ultimate reality, through wisdom.¹⁴ According to this tradition, human suffering arises from ignorance (avidyā) of the true nature of the self (Ātman), which is identical to Brahman.¹⁵ The Upaniṣads, Bhagavad Gītā, and the works of Śaṅkarācārya provide the philosophical foundation for Jñānayoga, asserting that liberation (mokṣa) is attained through knowledge rather than ritualistic practice.¹⁶ Unlike Bhakti yoga (devotional path) or Karmayoga (selfless action), Jñānayoga directly seeks the dissolution of ignorance, leading to an understanding of non-duality (Advaita).¹⁷

A comparison of Freudian Analysis and Jñānayoga reveals contrasting perspectives on the self. While Freud viewed the self as fragmented into the id, ego, and superego, Advaita Vedānta sees the self as non-dual and ultimately identical with Brahman.¹⁸ Freudian psychoanalysis is concerned with unconscious desires and psychological conflict, whereas

¹⁰ Freud, S. (2000). *Three essays on the theory of sexuality* (J. Strachey, Trans., pp. 22–23). Basic Books.

¹¹ Jung, C. (1933). *Modern man in search of a soul* (pp. 12–13). Routledge & Kegan Paul.

¹² Freud, S. (1961). *Beyond the pleasure principle* (J. Strachey, Trans., pp. 8–9). W. W. Norton & Company.

¹³ Lacan, J. (1977). *Écrits: A selection* (A. Sheridan, Trans., pp. 1–7). Tavistock Publications.

¹⁴ Radhakrishnan, S. (1927). *Indian philosophy* (Vol. 2, pp. 496–497). Oxford University Press.

¹⁵ Śaṅkarācārya. (1921). *Vivekacūdāmaṇi (Crest-jewel of discrimination)* (Swami Madhavananda, Trans., verses 231–234, pp. 101–102). Advaita Ashrama.

¹⁶ Swami Sivananda (Trans.). (2000). *Bhagavad Gītā*, Chapters 2, 4, 13 (Chapter 4, verses 34–38, pp. 124–126). Divine Life Society.

¹⁷ Swami Nikhilananda (Trans.). (1975). *Upaniṣads: Chāndogya Upaniṣad, Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (6.2.1., p. 93). Harper & Row.

¹⁸ Śaṅkarācārya. (1996). *Upadeśa sāhasrī* (A. J. Alston, Trans., Chapter 18, verses 4–5, pp. 201–202). Sri Satguru Publications.

Jñānayoga aims to transcend desires altogether, considering them the root of bondage.¹⁹ The methods of the two systems also differ—Freud relied on psychoanalysis, dream interpretation, and free association, whereas Jñānayoga employs self-inquiry and meditative contemplation.²⁰ Ultimately, while Freudian Analysis seeks psychological integration within the framework of personal identity, Jñānayoga dissolves personal identity in the realization of absolute consciousness. Despite their differences, both traditions contribute to the broader understanding of human consciousness, with Freud focusing on psychological healing and Jñānayoga offering a path to spiritual liberation.

In this connection, it has to be mentioned that Carl Jung's concept of individuation closely aligns with the objectives of Jñānayoga. Individuation is integrating the fragmented aspects of the self—conscious and unconscious—into a harmonious whole. Jung's notion of the *Self* (a totality that transcends the ego) resonates with the Vedāntic idea of *Ātman* as the true self beyond the mind and body. Jungian psychology also speaks of archetypes—universal symbols embedded in the collective unconscious. For example, the archetype of the Wise Old Man mirrors the guru's role in Jñānayoga, guiding the seeker toward self-realization.

Gyana Yoga, being deeply connected to mind, memory, knowledge, and consciousness, is supported by the Four Pillars of Knowledge as outlined by Śaṅkarācārya (8th Century CE). They are as follows:

- (i) Nityānityavastuviveka (Discrimination between eternal and non-eternal things): Everyone has to understand the difference between eternal and non-eternal things. This helps in recognizing the ever-changing nature of the body and mind while the true self remains constant. Identifying our own ability to witness this process is a goal of Jnana Yoga.
- (ii) Ihāmūtraphalabhogavirāga (renunciation from This Worldly and Transend Worldly enjoyment): Everyone has to take away from the enjoyment of this worldly and transend worldly experience. This fosters detachment from worldly pleasures and pains, cultivating inner peace. This is also translated as dispassion; vairagya involves acceptance and a lack of feverishness. We become less attached to the

¹⁹ Nakamura, H. (1983). *A history of early Vedānta philosophy* (pp. 325–326). Motilal Banarsidass.

²⁰ Deutsch, E. (1969). *Advaita Vedānta: A philosophical reconstruction* (pp. 45–47). University of Hawaii Press.

pleasures and pains of the world. This is how we can experience the second pillar of knowledge. When we do, we become free of unsatisfied cravings and attitudes of aversion.

- (iii) **Ṣaṭ-Sampatti (The Six Wealths):** The Six wealths are śama or tranquillity, dama or sense control, uparati or endurance, titīkṣā or inner contentment, samādhāna or serenity and śraddhā or faith. These Six wealths, viz., tranquillity, sense control, endurance, inner contentment, faith, and serenity, stabilize the mind and emotions. Thus, mastering these six wealth or steps is key to controlling the emotions and mind and a way to success in Jñānayoga.
- (iv) **Mumuṣatva (Constant desire for liberation):** This is the deep longing for liberation and self-realization. These pillars guide practitioners toward enlightenment and ultimate bliss. From within, you desire the best. Total freedom, enlightenment, and the highest longing should be the goal of the yogi.

These pillars serve as a guide for practitioners, leading them toward enlightenment and ultimate bliss. After successfully practising these four pillars, a Jñāna yogi must move to the threefold practices, namely, Śravaṇa, Manana and Nididhyāsa.²¹ Then and only then will he be able to explore more and proceed deeper on the path of Jñānayoga.

In conclusion, it could be said that Jñānayoga represents one of the most profound and intellectually demanding paths to self-realization within Indian philosophy. Rooted in the Upaniṣadic and Vedāntic traditions, it emphasizes the transcendence of ignorance (avidyā) through self-inquiry, contemplation, and direct cognition of the ultimate reality (Brahman). By examining its intersections with psychoanalytic thought, particularly Freudian and Jungian perspectives, we observe a shared pursuit of self-awareness, though their goals diverge—psychoanalysis seeks psychological integration, whereas Jñānayoga aims at the dissolution of personal identity into absolute consciousness. The Four Pillars of Knowledge provide a structured approach to this path, guiding practitioners toward liberation through discrimination, renunciation, inner discipline, and an unwavering desire for truth. As humanity continues to grapple with existential and psychological dilemmas, the philosophical insights of Jñānayoga

²¹ Śaṅkarācārya. (1984). *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya* (Swami Gambhirananda, Trans., Chapter 1, Section 1, pp. 22–23). Advaita Ashrama.

remain ever-relevant, offering a timeless framework for intellectual clarity, inner peace, and ultimate liberation.

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