



Understanding Jnana and Cognition of Jivanmukta from the Point of View of Ashtavakra Gita and Jivanmukti Viveka

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Abstract

Bhagavadgita highlights the importance of jñāna as the highest form of purification and states that there exists nothing else equal to this. Recognising the loftiness of this idea, the ancient Indian culture encourages the pursuit of Jñāna, attaining which, one achieves the true purpose of life, i.e., to realize oneself as Atman and not merely the superimpositions of the body–mind complex. In other words, Jñāna enables to see the reality as it is by enabling the abilities of perception or cognition rise to their fullest. Thus, the difference in the behaviour of the Jñānis from the rest can be attributed to their pure wisdom, which in turn influences their cognitive abilities.

Objectives : The life and acts of Jnanis need to be carefully observed and emulated by those who are still on the path to be able to realize their goal. Therefore, the author felt a need to undertake this study with the objectives to understand:

- The relation between Jñāna, its influence on the cognitive abilities and its manifestation as the behaviour of a Jnani or Jīvanmukta
- How the essential attributes of vasana-kṣaya and Mano-nāśa differentiate a Jnani from the rest

Method: This is a conceptual, textual-theoretical paper. The author chose to study the above aspects of a Jīvanmukta in the light of the teachings of the Aṣṭāvakra Gītā, one of the most practical treatises on Advaita supported by few concepts from the Jivanmukti Viveka. He explains the concept of Jñāna in the light of non-attachment, which leads to reduction in Vasanas and eventually helps in Mano-nāśa, enabling a Jnani to act from the state of witness-consciousness. The themes discussed in this paper include aspects such as witness-consciousness, non-doership and freedom from samskaras in the light of the life of a Jīvanmukta. The results present the philological analysis of selected passages from both the texts, with conceptual mapping to cognitive mechanism, thus

bringing an analytic synthesis of the twin processes vasana-kṣaya and mano-nāśa as explanatory mechanisms. The cognitive function of a Jīvanmukta is explained by also drawing references to the lives of illustrative hermeneutic masters from the recent times.

Results: Based on the study of the conceptual mapping, the following results are obtained by the author:

1. Jñāna implies non-attachment and direct Insight
2. Cognitive transformation happens through Vasana-kṣaya.
3. Mano-nāśa implies functional dissolution of mind but not destruction of mental abilities.
4. Jīvanmukta's cognition & behaviour is marked by characteristics such as equanimity. Selflessness, fearlessness, spontaneity, effortless actions etc.

Conclusions: Finally, the paper proposes to derive practical insights about the nature and behaviour of a Jīvanmukta:

1. Jñāna redefines Human Cognition.
2. Vasana-kṣaya and Mano-nāśa are essential for stabilizing Jñāna.
3. Jīvanmukta's behaviour is a natural outcome of inner freedom.
5. The path to Jñāna is a gradual reorientation towards witness-consciousness.

Keywords: jñāna, jīvanmukta, cognition & behaviour, advaita vedānta, vasana-kṣaya, mano-nāśa

Introduction

As per the tenets of Sanathana Dharma, the fundamental purpose of human life is to realize one's true nature and redeem oneself from the cycles of birth and death. As per our scriptures, the bondage of humans is explained by the phenomenon of

अविद्य (Ignorance) → काम (Selfish Desires) → कर्म (Actions)

"अविद्य" refers to the false and limited identity of associating oneself with the body-mind complex, that causes "काम" or desires which arise based on this wrong identity, ultimately leading to "कर्म" or wrong actions thereof. Thus, "अविद्य" or wrong knowledge leads to vicious cycle of bondage which takes man away from realizing his goal. This cycle of bondage can be broken once for all only by addressing the root cause of "अविद्य" with the antidote of Jnana or knowledge. Thus, Jnana is the ultimate solution for human salvation as per our ancient scriptures – "ज्ञानादेव तु कैव". Even in the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna proclaimed "न हि ज्ञानेन सदृशं पवित्रमिह विद्यते", highlighting the importance of Jnana as the highest form of purification,

equal to which there exists nothing else in this world. The need for the final attainment of Jnana as the final step to one's evolution is therefore extremely relevant, notwithstanding the path or the approach one takes such as *Karma marga*, *Bhakti marga*, *Gnana marga*, and so on.

There are two types of knowledge as per our scriptures – *Para Vidya* and *Apara Vidya*. The former refers to the knowledge which helps in attaining the ultimate liberation and is also called by other names such as *Brahma Vidya* or *Brahma Jnana*. The latter stands for secular education which supports daily living. It is also called as *Jeevanopadhi Vidya* or *Loukika Vidya*. While it is the *Para Vidya* which ultimately helps in attaining the life's purpose, it is equally important to look at both *Para Vidya* and *Apara Vidya* like two wings of the bird which help it to fly higher, and hence, equal emphasis needs to be given to both forms of knowledge. It has been unfortunate that the *Para Vidya* has been overlooked and neglected for a large period in the Indian education system due to the influence of the western system of education. However, it is a matter of encouragement that domains such as the Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) are turning the tables by integrating the spiritual education with the mainstream academic curriculum, as it was always intended to be. As Swami Vivekananda said "You can't preach spirituality on an empty stomach", *Apara Vidya* is not to be looked down upon or neglected, but needs to be based on the foundation of *Para Vidya*, which gives the spiritual, moral and ethical moorings for it to guide one's efforts meaningfully.

"सा विद्या या विमुक्तये" say our scriptures. That knowledge which redeems alone is the true knowledge. The importance of *Para Vidya* cannot be overemphasised, as it is the only knowledge that can help one in attaining the real goal of life; all other forms of knowledge are to be viewed only as the means to support one's efforts towards pursuing the goal. It naturally means that *Para Vidya* should be considered as the most important knowledge. That is why, it is said *आध्यात्म विद्या विद्यानाम्*. The question which follows is that how does the spiritual knowledge bestow the highest?

Firstly, it clearly explains the purpose of life and starts by asking the right questions about one's existence. It also gives methodical approach towards pursuing this goal and most importantly, promises the result and the benefit of attaining supreme peace beyond the dualities of worldly existence.

Lord Krishna assures in the Bhagavad Gita:

नेहाभिक्रमनाशोऽस्ति प्रत्यवायो न विद्यते ।

स्वल्पमप्यस्य धर्मस्य त्रायते महतो भयात् ॥

In this path, no effort is ever wasted, nor is there any harmful result. Even a little practice of this dharma protects one from great fear.

Our history and mythology are replete with numerous examples of people whose lives have been redeemed by virtue of possessing this knowledge, irrespective of their standing and credentials with respect to the worldly learning and status. Starting from enlightened souls such as Sri Adi Sankaracharya who emphasised on the oneness of the self, to Nachiketa who chose the *sreyas* (beneficial) over *preyas* (pleasant) and denounced worldly pleasures, to Ramakrishna Paramahansa who attained the self through purest *Bhakti* or the likes of Nisarga Datta Maharaj and Ramana Maharshi who were continuously engaged in the contemplation of their true self – all have proven a common point that pursuing this sacred knowledge enables one to live in a state of peace and equanimity which helps one to even live a better life in this society while they attain the wisdom.

Such realized beings attain *mukti* or liberation in two ways:

- *Videhamukti* – Liberation after giving up the body
- *Jivanmukti* – Liberation (freedom) while one is still in the body.

While both are essentially the same state of liberation or freedom and therefore technically equal, the difference is the presence of the *Jiva* or the individual in the body. The *Mundaka Upanishad* speaks about the best of the Brahma Jnanis or the realized souls as:

प्रणो ह्येष यः सर्वभूतैर्विभाति विजानन्विद्वान्भवते नातिवादी ।

आत्माक्रीडाः आत्मारतिः क्रियावान् एष ब्रह्मविदां वरिष्ठः ॥

In other words, this verse refers to the *Jivanmuktas*, who are active on the outside for the welfare of the world and yet revelling in the self and sporting within themselves on the inside. To explain in simple terms, the *Jivanmuktas* work in the world as those, who having realized the truth themselves and revel in that state all through, are also equally engaged in the work and actions for the welfare of the world. Therefore, the *Jivanmuktas* live as embodiments of perfect balance, equanimity and compassion.

Before we discuss about the state of samadhi, it is necessary to acknowledge that only an equanimous and pure mind is capable of taking correct decisions, which not only are useful and beneficial for a person, but also helpful for the greater good. Thus, the word *समाधि* is actually to be understood as *sama-dheeh* (सम धीः), i.e. an equanimous mind. Thus, *Samadhi* is a state of equanimity in which the mind is perfectly still, calm and pure without any modifications. In other words, it is a state wherein the mind ceases to exist in its regular form and merges with the ultimate consciousness and thus, steady.

We now discuss about the three types of Samadhi.

- *Savikalpa Samadhi* – A deep meditative absorption in which the mind is quiet but still aware of distinctions between meditator, meditation, and object.
- *Nirvikalpa Samadhi* – A state of complete non-dual absorption where all mental distinctions and the sense of individuality dissolve into pure consciousness.
- *Sahaja Samadhi* – A natural, effortless, and continuous abidance in the Self that remains even during normal daily activities.

A *Jivanmukta* operates from the state of *Sahaja Samadhi*, as explained in the sloka from the *Ashtavakra Gita*:

*देहाभिमाने गलितं ज्ञानेन परमात्मनि।
यत्र यत्र मनो याति तत्र तत्र समाधयः॥*

When the mind becomes steady, pure, and absorbed in the Self, then every state becomes *samadhi*, regardless of external activity or movement. In other words, the concept of ordinary cognition which is based on factors such as perceptions, memories, thoughts, etc. merges into the state of consciousness and operates from a state of identification with the self.

Jivanmuktas operate the same as that of any other ordinary human being, the only difference being that they are consciously aware of their true identity, and hence remain as a witness to their own actions through the body and mind. *Jivanmuktas* can perceive the oneness of all existence. Hence, they are unaffected by the happenings and emotions of life. They completely involve, yet they are emotionally unattached to anything or anyone. They do not operate from the mind level (i.e. intelligence) as the source unlike ordinary human beings. They operate from the seat of consciousness or *intuition* which inspires them to act. Thus, they use the mind and other faculties to execute the voice of consciousness. They are also capable of engaging and withdrawing with the world at their will and not subject to the vagaries of mind. The common reason behind these abilities of the *Jivanmukta* is their awareness of the presence of the self alone, which expresses in the form of themselves as well as others (*अहं ब्रह्म सर्वं ब्रह्म*). As per the teachings of the *Ashtavakra Gita*, a *Jivanmukta*'s cognition is a spontaneous play within Awareness without attachment, unlike the case of an ordinary mortal's cognition which is an activity of the mind involving dualistic perception.

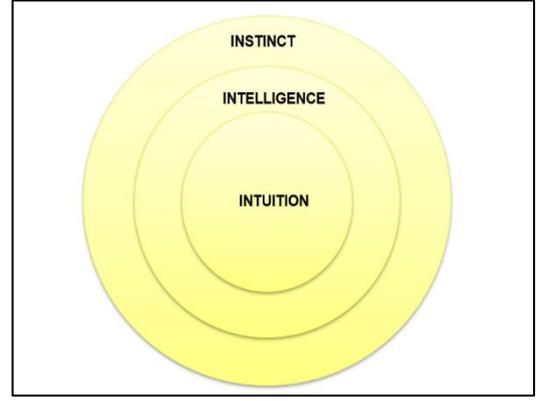


Fig 1: Instinct → Intelligence → intuition

Before discussing further, let's understand the above figure by discussing about 3I's, i.e. Instinct, Intelligence and Intuition.

Instinct

Instinct refers to the basic innate quality that is present as the lower rung in the ladder of evolution. This behaviour is typically seen in the species or creatures like animals, which just go as per the dictum of the mind. As we understand, there is no higher mind (discriminative factor) present in the animals, and hence it is very apt to classify these as the species that operate from Instinct level.

Intelligence

We then move on to evolved species of creatures called humans, who not only have a mind, but also possess a state of higher mind (discriminative factor) that guides them to undertake actions that are based on a greater logic or reasoning.

An apt subhashita explains this distinct behaviour of humans and animals.

*आहार निद्रा भय मैथुनं च सामान्यमेतत् पशुभिर्नराणाम् ।
धर्मो हि तेषामधिको विशेषः धर्मेण हीनाः पशुभिः समानाः ॥*

The processes of eating, sleeping, fear and procreation are common to both animals and humans. However, it is the quality of discrimination that is present in humans that makes them special evolved beings. Thus, those humans who are devoid of Dharma are equated to animals.

Intuition

However, there is another state of existence above the human beings, which has a special faculty called super mind, that operates at a very exalted state, where it is intuitive in nature. Logic, reasoning and tarka cease to exist here, and such a person who is purely guided by intuition just knows that tasks need to be performed, without getting entangled with the

obsession of results. He knows that an action needs to be undertaken, he knows how to give his best and deliver the output for a particular action and he also knows that he is not the doer. Thus, it can be comparatively understood that he operates in autopilot mode, knowing very well that he is just an instrument of the Divine. Additionally, it can also be stated that before he undertakes any action, during performing the action and after performing the action, he remains in a state of equanimity.

Such an exalted state is only possible, when one's intellect becomes steady, pure, and absorbed in the Self, where his individual soul doesn't take the decision based on his intelligence, but, the higher self (or the *Atman*) takes the decision, from the point of view of intuition.

2. Origin of the study

Sri Krishna says in Bhagavad Gita,

*यद्यदाचरति श्रेष्ठस्तत्तदेवेतरो जनः ।
स यत्प्रमाणं कुरुते लोकस्तदनुवर्तते ॥*

The above verse means that as the noble ones conduct themselves in the society, the others follow suit. And the world acts as per the standards set by such great beings. Thus, it is important to study and understand the life and actions of such noble ones so that it serves the ordinary human beings to be in good stead and live ideal lives. Even among the noble ones, best are those who have realized their true nature and are living effortless lives with absolute detachment and constant welfare of others.

The reason for choosing this study is that several realized masters, who belonged to the Indian soil, delved into their intuition for taking decisions at personal and at organizational level. Hence, the author felt need to study the behavioural patterns of such individuals, so that in dealing with the situations in personal life, professional life, social life, etc., decisions taken from the point of view of intuition guide him correctly, so that no selfishness is accounted for. In case of ordinary human beings, all actions are driven by thoughts or mind, which has its vagaries, and hence, are subject to the dualities of good and bad outcomes. However, in case of a realized person or a *Jivanmukta*, the mind dissolves completely, and therefore, he operates purely from intuition or consciousness, rising beyond the dualities of good and bad actions / outcomes. While *Jivanmuktas* are the same on the inside, their worldly disposition could be different, and hence they could don several roles such as kings, administrators, institution builders, social workers, businessmen and so on. Many a times, their decisions could have an impact beyond their individual level and hence, it is important to understand as to how

cognition and other decision-making aspects work in the lives of such realized masters such as Rama, Krishna, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Ramana Maharshi, Nisargadatta Maharaj.

3. Methodology

This is a conceptual, textual-theoretical paper. The author chose to study the above aspects of a *Jīvanmukta* in the light of the teachings of the *Ashtavakra Gita*, one of the most practical treatises on *Advaita* supported by few concepts from the *Jivanmukti Viveka*. The concept of *Jnana* in the light of non-attachment, as explained in *Jivanmukti Viveka*, leads to reduction in *Vasanas* and eventually helps in *Manonasa*, enabling a *Jnani* to act from the state of witness-consciousness.

The idea to liberation proposed in *Jivanmukti Viveka* is that the process of evolution happens as follows:

Jñāna → Vāsanā-kṣaya → Manonāśa → Jīvanmukti

While the central idea of the *Ashtavakra Gita* mainly focuses on the nature of an individual being the supreme self, the *Jivanmukti Viveka* highlights the means to attain liberation through the process. Thus, the *Ashtavakra Gita* is a text which speaks from the perspective of the individual as the realized self, the *Jivanmukti Viveka* mentions the means to attain that state. The important concepts common from both the texts are Jñāna, Vāsanā-kṣaya, Manonāśa, Jīvanmukti and Videhamukti.

The themes discussed in this paper also include allied aspects such as witness-consciousness, non-doership, prarabdha, etc. in the light of the life of a *Jivanmukta*. The results present the philological analysis of selected passages from both the texts, with conceptual mapping to cognitive mechanism, thus bringing an analytic synthesis of the twin processes *vasana kshaya* and *manonasa* as explanatory mechanisms. The cognitive function of a *Jīvanmukta* is explained by also drawing references to the lives of illustrative masters from the recent times.

4. Research Gap

Although people have studied and reported their findings on *jivanmukta sthiti*, there are less research studies that speak about the intuitive abilities of a *jivanmuktas*, that help them to deal their personal life, organizational life and also guide devotees or followers. Many studies have been done on *Jivanmuktas* or the state of realized masters. However, few studies have focused

on exploring the intuitive abilities of *Jivanmuktas*. Also, the aspect of cognitive abilities has been studied in general but not been fully explored in connection with *Jnana* and in case of *Jivanmuktas*. The themes of both these texts convey that for *Jivanmuktas*, cognitive abilities, though appear to exist similar to that of ordinary human beings, are actually not associated with the ego identity. Rather, cognition continues as a superficial movement of the mind, but without binding power. Vidyaranya Swami, the author of *Jivanmukri Viveka* explains this cognitive state akin to that of a burnt rope retaining its form but losing the power to bind, a potter's wheel spinning even after the pot is made (symbolising *Prarabdha*), etc. Upon studying the literature, it was observed that cognition is the differentiating element between a common man and a realized soul. The author found that the aspect of cognition is common for common man as well as *Jivanmukta*, with the only difference being the perspective from which cognition is applied. Thus, this paper analyses the key concepts in the light of cognitive abilities.

5. Findings and results

Based on the study of the conceptual mapping from the study of both the scriptures chosen for this research study, the following results are obtained by the author:

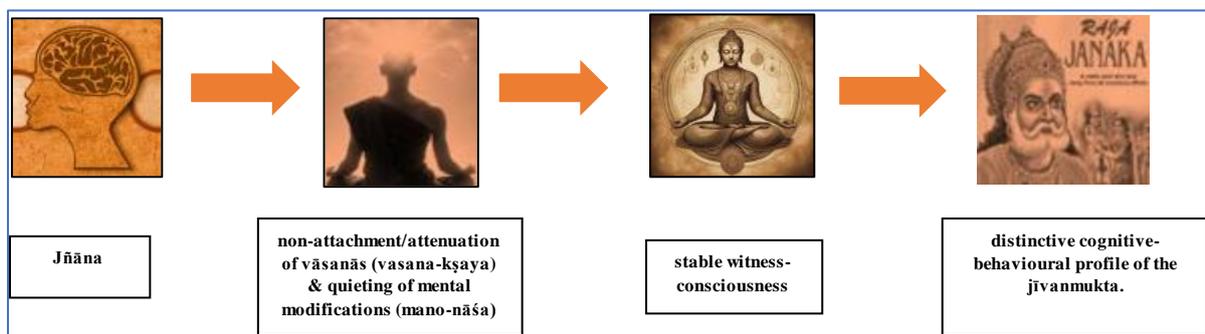


Fig 2: Evolution from intelligence to intuition

1. *Jñāna* implies non-attachment and direct Insight

Jnana is the flame which burns down the *sanchita* (accumulated) and *aagami* (to come) karmas for a *Jnani*. Only *prarabdha* (those actions whose results are already in motion) remains. Therefore, a *Jnani* is neither attached to the actions or their consequences and just acts as per the flow. Moreover, *Jnanis* operate beyond instincts (animalistic nature) and intelligence (human nature), and act from intuition (Divine nature). Therefore, *Jnana* ultimately implies acting from seat of intuition or direct insight, beyond the worldly attachments.

2. Cognitive transformation happens through *Vasanakṣhaya*.

Human beings are creatures of habit. Habits create repeated actions, which in turn create impressions on the mind, called as *Vasanas*. These *Vasanas* in turn force one to get

caught up the cycle of such tendencies over lifetimes, leading to doership and enjoyership. Thus, *vasanas* push one into the vicious cycle of habit, action and reaction. It is only when the cognitive abilities are augmented by virtue of Jnana can one realize to break free from such habits, thus eventually leading to a state of reduction in the *vasanas* or *vasanakshaya*.

3. *Mano-nāśa implies functional dissolution of mind but not destruction of mental abilities.*

The removal of *vasanas* eventually frees ones mind of the deep-rooted impressions and the actions thereof. Thus, mind, which is a bundle of thoughts and subconscious impressions starts to disintegrate with constant practice and ultimately leads to *manonasa* or destruction of mind. Here, destruction of mind does not imply the ability or faculty of thinking itself. Rather, it refers to *manas* or the mind which holds the ego-identity, memory and other such aspects of the mind which bind one to the body. However, the mental abilities and faculties are not destroyed, as can be observed in the case of *Jnanis*. In fact, *Jnanis* have a sharper utilization of the mental abilities as it only becomes an able instrument which is guided by the higher intelligence.

*यच्छेद्वाङ्मनसी प्राज्ञस्तद्यच्छेज्ज्ञान आत्मनि ।
ज्ञानमात्मनि महति नियच्छेत्तद्यच्छेच्छान्त आत्मनि ॥*

4. *Jīvanmukta's cognition & behaviour is marked by characteristics such as equanimity, Selflessness, fearlessness, spontaneity, effortless actions etc.*

A *Jīvanmukta* sees the self in all and hence sees the unity in diversity. Therefore, the *Jīvanmukta* is not subject to other vicissitudes of life and is guided by intuition and therefore remains equanimous in all situations beyond all dualities.

6. Conclusion and future outlook

Finally, the paper proposes to derive practical insights about the nature and behaviour of a *Jīvanmukta*:

1) *Jñāna redefines Human Cognition.*

Jñāna could be of two types - *Parokṣa-jñāna* (Indirect or conceptual knowledge) and *Aparokṣa-jñāna* (Direct knowledge). The former is intellectual understanding attained through *Sravana* and *Manana*, while the latter is direct experience through *Nidhidhyasana*. In total, *Jñāna*

In case of an aspirant, *Jñāna* is the dawn of the understanding of his eternal self, and hence changes his perspective towards putting efforts in reducing body-mind consciousness. In case of a *Jīvanmukta*, *Jñāna* is not a merely mental act or process, but his very nature. It means that the *Jīvanmukta* no longer needs to know or perceive, but he verily is the experiential

reality. In both the cases, Jñāna changes the cognitive abilities of humans and either helps them to tend towards realizing the self or actually being the self, as the case maybe.

2) *Vasanakṣhaya and Mano-nāśa are essential for stabilizing Jñāna.*

Vidyaranya Swami states that even after attaining Jñāna, mental impressions or vāsanās may still remain, causing minor disturbances. He states that Brahma-jñāna destroys ignorance, Vāsanā-kṣaya removes agitation, Manonāśa brings spontaneous peace. Brahma-jñāna reveals freedom while vāsanā-kṣaya and manonāśa make it effortless and practical.

3) *Jīvanmukta's behaviour is a natural outcome of inner freedom.*

Brahma-jñāna reveals inner freedom; Vāsanā-kṣaya and manonāśa make it effortless and abiding. A Jivanmukta is characterised by perfect inner peace, lack of doership and enjoyership, equanimity in pleasure and pain, spontaneous compassion and detachment, etc. The key idea is that while knowledge destroys ignorance, deep-rooted tendencies created by ignorance are destroyed only by persistent contemplation and detachment. The knower of Brahman becomes truly free and liberated even while living only when these are gone.

4) *The path to Jñāna is a gradual reorientation towards witness-consciousness.*

Thus, in order to reach the state of Jivanmukti, one needs to traverse inward, along the various stages that have been mentioned. The future scope of this paper is to study the lives of those people who are on the spiritual path and have the potential to attain the *Jivanmukta* state. This includes Karma Yogis, pontiffs, etc.

The Ashtavakra Gita conveys three main themes of a Jivanmukta's life. Firstly, the impact of Jnana. Jivanmukta, by virtue of attaining experiential wisdom, develops the ability to see the world not as a separate object but expression of the Self. His cognition is free from the conditioning of the mind and senses and thus enables profound clarity behind all actions. This coincides with the Brahmajnana aspect explained by Vidyaranya Swami as the first step.

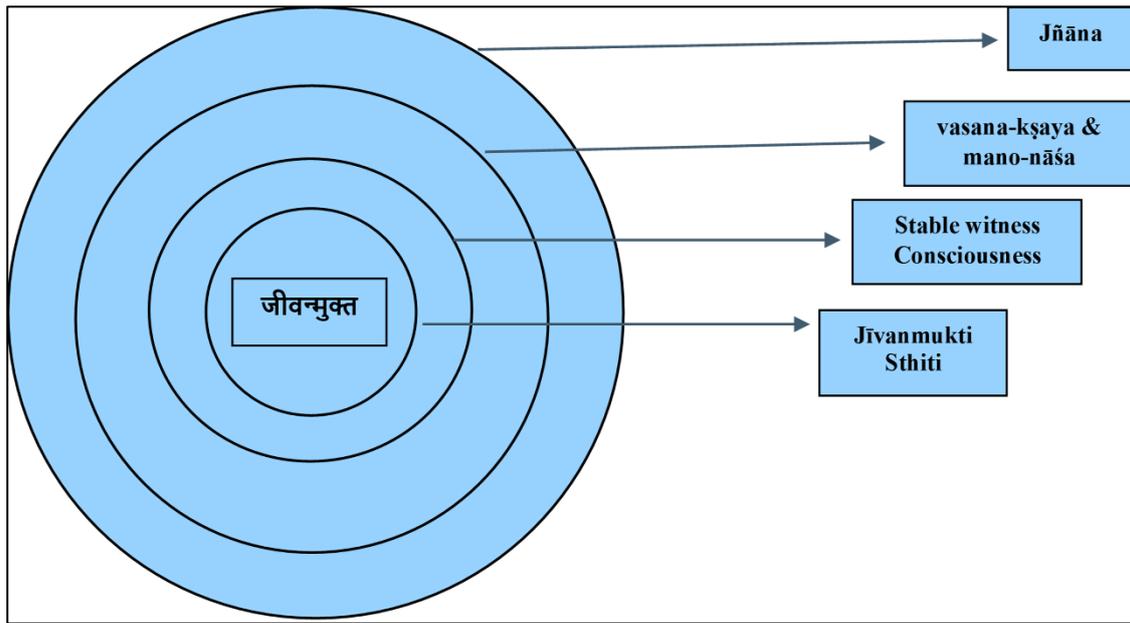


Fig 3: Transition towards the stage of Jivanmukta sthiti

7. Conclusion

A Jivanmukta is guided by intuition, not merely from intelligence. It is this intuitive ability which makes him free from the bondage of doer ship and enjoyer ship. Once he becomes driven by intuition, he is only an instrument and hence, his perception and cognition is like that of a mirror which reflects all that in comes in contact with and yet remains itself. In other words, this is Vasanakshaya as explained in Jivanmukti Viveka. As the inherent tendencies reduce, the influence of mind or intelligence reduces and intuition takes over. Finally, a Jivanmukta's existence is characterized by unaffected from the dualities. He remains as a witness, and thus operates from a state of witness-consciousness. Dualities of the world are experienced by mind. Weakening of the vasanas leads to dissolution of mind and hence, the final aspect of Manonasa happens. Thus, the Jivanmukta's state of mind is but a combination of Brahma Gnana, Vasanakshaya and Manonasa, which leads to stable cognition from the highest point of awareness.

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