



Atman, Jnan and Behavioural Science: Bridging Ancient and Modern Thought

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Abstract

The American film director Hal Hartley said: 'We discover and invent new ways of finding the same old thing.' Since the settlement of civilisation, the human race has been confronted with the question of self-actualisation — 'Who are we?' and 'Why are we here?' This enquiry has continued through philosophy, religion and today in behavioural sciences. This paper explores the Vedantic concept of Atman (the pure innate self) and Jnan (knowledge) and their parallels with modern psychological theories of self. Key intersections include the Panchakoshas as a hierarchy of needs, Antahkarana (Manas/Buddhi/Chitta/Ahankara) paralleling Freudian personality structure, the Rasa-Bhava theory of Natya Shastra as ancient emotional intelligence, and the six pramanas (Pratyaksha, Anumana, Upamana, Arthapatti, Anupalabdhi, Sabda) as ancient epistemological methodology. The paper advocates the integration of meditation and yoga with modern CBT and clinical approaches to address the current epidemic of mental health disorders.

Keywords: *Atman, Jnan, self-concept, Vedanta, Panchakoshas, Antahkarana, behavioural science*

Introduction: The Question of Self

Since the time the sapiens species settled adjacent to agricultural land, coming out of the forest of chaos, their needs for food, settlement and security were met (Aarzo & Lal, 2025a). As per Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the initial four levels of the pyramid were constructed, and that exposed — for the first time in history — the human race to the question of Self-actualisation. The first thirst for realising 'Who we are?' and 'Why we began here?' gave rise to philosophy and religion at the time of civilisation's settlement, and has continued till today in our adventure with behavioural sciences (Ramanathan & Aithal, 2025).

Atman: The Pure Innate Self

If we dissect the word Atman and try to find its origin, we find it formed from the Sanskrit root meaning 'breath'. Coincidentally, even Aristotle believed that it is pneuma (air) that serves as the mobile vehicle for psyche (soul). In the Indian tradition, Atman is the essence or the self — our true and pure innate material. The consciousness of a human being is closely linked to it: when the atman leaves the body, the person is no longer conscious (Aarzo & Lal, 2025b).

The Atman concept is closely associated with Jivatman (individual self), which has existed across multiple bodies and lifetimes. However, one's perception of oneself — called Ahankara (ego) — is the darkness that shrouds the ultimate light of the Atman (Joshi, 2024). The removal of these clouds is nothing but obtaining Jnan (Knowledge). The bodily aspect of humans (prakriti) and the emotional aspect (mind) prevent this realisation, resulting in a delusional human being acting according to emotional interest.

Atman vs. Modern Self: A Comparative Analysis

The famous psychologist William James said: 'The self is when I reflect back on Me.' The modern self is a reflexive project — it continues to change as our aspirations change. Atman is more of a rigid, fixed theory of self: described in (Kapadia et al., 2026) scriptures as the pure essence of our lives. The modern interpretation of self, according to psychology, says it is rather (Lal & Aarzo, 2026) a changing concept. Ahankara (ego) is described in the scriptures as born of ignorance and is the reason for all pain in the world. Contrary to this, the modern self is limited only to the limitations of experiences and inner motivation.

Despite these differences, both theories point towards self-regulation: the old concept advocates Indriya nigraha (controlled sensuality) while the modern concept advocates avoiding excess to have a regulated and healthy self. Both also advocate space for self-introspection and meditation to ponder over one's thoughts and actions.

Jnan, Pramanas and Modern Methodology

The entire art and science of understanding the self is referred to as Jnan. In ancient scriptures, the Self can be known by six proofs (pramanas): (1) Pratyaksha (Perception), (2) Anumana (Inference), (3) Upamana (Comparison), (4) Arthapatti (Postulation), (5) Anupalabधि (Non-apprehension), (6) Sabda (Verbal Testimony). Interestingly, these mechanisms are very

similar to our modern pattern of scholarship — involving perception, inference, comparison and analogy, postulation, analysis and expert testimony.

Rasa-Bhava Theory and Emotional Intelligence

Very descriptive work on emotions and their expression was done by Bharat Muni in the Natya Shastra, which talks of Rasa (aesthetic essence) and Bhava (emotion). It explains how an aesthetic work evokes an emotional response in an audience when the work of art portrays a particular Bhava. The theory distinguishes between long-term and short-term Bhava, describing the cycle of stimulus and response. By knowing which (Aarzo & Lal, 2026) Rasa constitutes the majority of our personality, we can understand our emotional makeup. In the West, we have recently begun accepting that EQ has an upper hand over IQ in day-to-day life, but in ancient India, this was present as the norm — reflected in epics, plays and regional painting.

Panchakoshas and Antahkarana

The Atman is postulated to be within the sheaths of five layers of the body: (1) Annamaya kosha (food/physical sheath), (2) Pranamaya kosha (sheath of vital life force), (3) Manomaya kosha (mental sheath), (4) Vigyanamaya kosha (sheath of intellect), (5) Anandamaya kosha (sheath of pure bliss). As one tries to lift each sheath through meditation and yoga, one reaches nearer to the inner Self. If viewed carefully, this model is a marvellous hierarchy of needs — once one basic need of human beings is satisfied, they start looking inwards towards their real selves.

The interplay of Manas, Buddhi, Chitta and Ahankar constitutes the Antahkarana. Manas (mind) is one of the receivers of sensory impact and processes it as indeterminate thinking — it is the seat of desire, like the Freudian 'Id'. Buddhi (intellect) discerns truth from falsehood, where judgment happens — like the conscious mind or superego. Chitta is the subconscious storehouse of all accumulated impressions, memories and experiences. Ahankara (ego) is similar to the Freudian ego that we acquire from social conditions.

Bridging Ancient and Modern: Mental Health Applications

Disorders related to mental health are now at the highest rise in the entire history of mankind. Hence, it becomes imperative for us to understand ourselves better, be happy, and have a sense of purpose to bring this epidemic of mental disorder to bay. This is the purpose of bridging the modern understanding with the past — using methods like meditation and yoga

for alleviating the sufferings of the present. fMRI scans are already available representing the benefits of meditation and mindfulness on the brain. Integrating older techniques with modern clinical drugs and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, combined with community support, will give a major blow to this epidemic.

As Adi Shankaracharya said: 'Atman is an ever-present reality. Yet because of ignorance, it is not realised. On the destruction of ignorance, Atman is realised.' Wishing for all of us: *Asato ma sadgamaya, tamaso ma jyotirgamaya, mrtuorma amrtam gamaya* (Lead us from the unreal to the real, from darkness to light, from death to immortality).

Conclusion

The convergence of ancient Vedantic wisdom and modern behavioural science reveals that humanity has always sought the same fundamental truths through different methodological lenses. The Panchakoshas parallel Maslow's hierarchy; the Antahkarana parallels Freudian structure; the Rasa-Bhava theory anticipates emotional intelligence; and the six pramanas parallel modern research methodology. Integrating these traditions offers not only richer theoretical models but also practical tools — meditation, yoga and value-driven living — for addressing the contemporary mental health crisis and cultivating leaders of clarity, purpose and integrity for the era of Amrit Kaal.

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