

# The Yogic Map of the Mind: Bridging Ancient Wisdom and Modern Psychotherapy

## Abstract

Yoga has gained a great deal of popularity in the west over the past few decades with Yoga studio's present throughout western countries, specifically the popularity of hatha yoga, the physical exercises. However, yoga is much more complex than what has been exported to the west. A part of Patanjali's Yoga sutra's offers a sophisticated psychological framework of the mind that predates modern psychotherapy by millennia and contains many practical tools and methods that have proven to be useful. Yogic psychology identifies four faculties of the mind—Manas, Buddhi, Chitta, and Ahamkara—and five primary mental fluctuations (vrttis): Pramana, Viparyaya, Vikalpa, Nidra, and Smriti. These constructs provide a nuanced understanding of cognition, emotion, identity, and consciousness. This article explores how yoga conceptualizes the mind, how its practices aim to regulate mental fluctuations, and how these insights complement and enrich contemporary psychotherapeutic modalities including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Psychodynamic Therapy, and Existential Therapy.

## Introduction

Yoga is often misunderstood in the West as a system of physical postures. However, its roots lie in a profound psychological and spiritual science aimed at liberation from suffering. Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, composed around 200 BCE, outline a path toward mental clarity and spiritual freedom through the regulation of the mind. Modern psychotherapy has had the similar goals, with much less emphasis on the spiritual side. This ancient system offers a compelling complement to modern psychotherapy, especially in its understanding of mental processes, identity, and transformation.

## The Four Faculties of the Mind in Yogic Psychology (Antahkarana)

### 1. Manas: The Sensory and Reactive Mind

Manas is the aspect of mind that processes sensory input and initiates reactive responses. It is responsible for attention, perception, and the coordination of motor responses. In psychological terms, Manas resembles the pre-attentive and perceptual systems that filter stimuli before higher-order cognition. Manas regulates our reactions to stimuli, the kind of reactions you don't think about. When dysregulated, Manas can lead to impulsivity, distraction, and sensory overload—symptoms often seen in anxiety and ADHD (Sadhguru, n.d.).

## 2. Buddhi: The Discriminative Intellect

Buddhi is the faculty of discernment, decision-making, analysis and ethical reasoning. It enables individuals to evaluate options, reflect on consequences, and choose wisely. Buddhi aligns with executive functioning and metacognition in cognitive science. In therapy, strengthening Buddhi is akin to enhancing cognitive flexibility and insight, central goals in CBT and DBT (Beck, 2011; Linehan, 1993).

## 3. Chitta: The Storehouse of Memory and Consciousness

Chitta is the deep subconscious repository of impressions (samskaras), desires, and latent tendencies. It influences behavior through unconscious conditioning and emotional memory. Chitta parallels the unconscious in psychodynamic theory, where repressed material shapes present experience. Yoga seeks to purify Chitta through meditation and ethical living, allowing latent patterns to surface and dissolve (Feuerstein, 2003).

## 4. Ahamkara: The Ego Construct

Ahamkara is the sense of "I" or ego—the identification with thoughts, roles, and personality. It creates the illusion of separateness and is often the root of psychological suffering. In existential therapy, this mirrors the tension between authentic selfhood and socially constructed identity. Yoga aims to transcend Ahamkara, revealing the deeper Self (Atman) beyond egoic constructs (Yalom, 1980).

## The Five Vrttis: Mental Fluctuations and Their Regulation

Patanjali identifies five vrttis—patterns of mental activity—that shape our experience of reality. Yoga practice aims to regulate these fluctuations to cultivate clarity and peace.

### 1. Pramana: Valid Cognition

Pramana refers to correct knowledge obtained through perception (pratyaksha), inference (anumana), and testimony (agama). While essential for navigating reality, overreliance on rationality can lead to rigidity. CBT similarly emphasizes cognitive restructuring to align thoughts with reality (Beck, 2011).

### 2. Viparyaya: Misperception

Viparyaya is false cognition or cognitive distortion. It mirrors maladaptive beliefs in CBT and DBT, such as catastrophizing or dichotomous thinking. Yoga encourages mindfulness and inquiry to correct these distortions, fostering psychological flexibility.

### 3. Vikalpa: Conceptualization Without Basis

Vikalpa involves imagination or verbal constructs without experiential grounding. While imagination can be creative, unchecked vikalpa may lead to anxiety, rumination, or delusion. Psychodynamic therapy explores how unconscious fantasies shape behavior, while yoga cultivates present-moment awareness to reduce vikalpa (Freud, 1963).

### 4. Nidra: Sleep and Dormant Consciousness

Nidra is the mental state of sleep, where consciousness is dormant but impressions continue to form. Yoga Nidra, a guided meditative practice, uses this state therapeutically to access subconscious material and promote deep relaxation. It has shown promise in treating trauma and insomnia (Saraswati, 1998).

## 5. Smriti: Memory

Smriti is memory, which influences perception and behavior. In psychotherapy, memory is central to understanding trauma, attachment, and identity. Yoga encourages non-identification with smriti, allowing practitioners to observe memories without being overwhelmed, attached or identifying with the memory.

### Yogic Practice as Mental Regulation

The central aim of yoga is “chitta vrtti nirodhah”—the cessation of mental fluctuations (Yoga Sutras 1.2). This is achieved through the eight limbs of yoga:

- Yama and Niyama: Ethical disciplines that purify behavior and intention.
- Asana: Physical postures that stabilize the body and nervous system.
- Pranayama: Breath regulation that calms the autonomic nervous system.
- Pratyahara: Withdrawal of senses to reduce external distraction.
- Dharana: Concentration that trains attention.
- Dhyana: Meditation that cultivates sustained awareness.
- Samadhi: Absorption into pure consciousness beyond ego and thought.

These practices offer a comprehensive system for emotional regulation, cognitive clarity, and spiritual insight.

### How Emotions are created from Yogic perspective:

The formation of an emotion from a yogic perspective is a chain reaction involving the 4 functions Manas, Ahamkara, Chitta and Buddhi. Let's walk through an example of how this would work:

1. A sensory input is received through the senses, in this case we see a snake on the path as we walk in the Forrest.
2. Manas reacts impulsively, perceiving the object and creating an immediate “like” or “dislike” response, in this case a dislike or fear.
3. Ahamkara creates a personal identity based on the event, I am a person who now is afraid of snakes.
4. Chitta brings forth past memories related to the object, any past scary encounters or fear of snakes. This strengthens the emotional reaction.
5. Buddhi, the discriminating intellect, can then either validate this reaction or choose a different response. However, when the mind is clouded by mental fluctuations (vrittis) of manas and the ego, buddhi’s wisdom is often overshadowed or overpowered and an unconscious emotional reaction dominates.

### The Yogic Goal: Transcending reactive emotions

Yoga does not aim to eliminate emotions but to observe and master them by controlling the fluctuations “vritti’s” of the mind. The goal is to move from being reactive and driven by impulses of manas, to being calmly aware, guided by the wisdom of buddhi.

Practices like meditation, pranayama, and detached self-observation help to:

### Integration with Modern Psychotherapy

#### Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Yoga enhances CBT by fostering metacognitive awareness and emotional regulation. Mindfulness-based yoga practices help clients observe thoughts without judgment, a core skill in CBT. Asana and pranayama also reduce physiological arousal, supporting cognitive restructuring (Beck, 2011).

#### Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)

DBT emphasizes distress tolerance, emotion regulation, and mindfulness—all of which are intrinsic to yoga. Practices like alternate nostril breathing and mantra meditation support parasympathetic activation and reduce emotional reactivity. Both systems value radical acceptance and the integration of opposites (Linehan, 1993).

### Psychodynamic Therapy

Yoga's concept of Chitta parallels the unconscious in psychodynamic theory. Practices like Yoga Nidra and self-inquiry facilitate access to repressed material, supporting insight and healing. The purification of samskaras resembles working through transference and unconscious conflict (Freud, 1963).

### Existential Therapy

Yoga and existential therapy both address the human condition—freedom, isolation, meaning, and death. Ahamkara's dissolution in yoga mirrors the existential quest for authenticity and transcendence. Both systems encourage clients to confront impermanence and live with intention (Yalom, 1980).

### Conclusion

Yoga offers a rich, multidimensional understanding of the mind that complements and deepens modern psychotherapy. Its model of Manas, Buddhi, Chitta, and Ahamkara provides a holistic map of cognition, emotion, and identity. The regulation of vrttis through ethical living, breathwork, and meditation cultivates mental clarity and inner peace. When integrated with CBT, DBT, psychodynamic, and existential therapies, yoga becomes a powerful ally in healing—bridging ancient wisdom with contemporary science.

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