

Perspectives on the Mind: A Comparative Study of Yogavāsiṣṭha and Western Psychology

Ruchi Bhat

Research Scholar, Department of Yoga, SAM Global University, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh

Dr. Madhvi Chandra

Supervisor, Department of Yoga, SAM Global University, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh

Abstract

The mind is central to both the Yogavāsiṣṭha and Western psychology, but the traditions ask different questions about it. The Yogavāsiṣṭha treats mind as the power of ideation through which bondage, desire, and experienced plurality arise; its final aim is liberation through self-knowledge. Western psychology is a plural scientific and clinical field seeking prediction, adaptation, well-being, or relief from distress. This conceptual article compares their accounts of mental construction, conditioning, selfhood, suffering, emotion regulation, agency, method, and transformation. Both recognise that interpretation shapes experience, patterns acquire causal force, decentring can weaken reactivity, and practice can alter conduct. Their deepest divergence concerns ontology and selfhood. The Yogavāsiṣṭha places mind within non-dual consciousness and aims at de-identification; Western psychology remains methodologically naturalistic and works toward a flexible, functional person. A disciplined dialogue can combine radical phenomenological inquiry with operational definitions, clinical safeguards, and empirical testing without reducing either framework to the other.

Keywords: Yogavāsiṣṭha, mind, Western psychology, consciousness, cognition, self, mindfulness, liberation

1. Introduction

The question “What is the mind?” does not receive a single answer in either Indian or Western thought. In the Yogavāsiṣṭha, it is inseparable from suffering and the possibility of freedom. Vasiṣṭha responds to Rāma’s existential disillusionment through reasoning, stories, contemplative instructions, and analyses of appearance. A widely used English translation links mental activity with imagination, volition, memory, desire, and the apparent solidity of experience ^[1]. The concise recension foregrounds the movement from dispassion and inquiry to the quieting of compulsive ideation ^[2]. Historical scholarship places the work within a complex Sanskrit tradition combining non-dual insight, yogic discipline, narrative experimentation, and attention to the constructed character of experience ^[3].

Modern textual research commonly relates the Yogavāsiṣṭha to the earlier Mokṣopāya tradition. Slaje’s analysis of jīvanmukti shows that liberation in this framework is not mere temporary absorption but an enduring release from erroneous involvement while life continues ^[4]. Studies of the Mokṣopāya and

related recensions also caution that the text has a layered history and that its later Vedāntic reception should not erase its distinctive formulations ^[5]. Fort's account of embodied liberation locates the Yogavāsiṣṭha within a broader "Yogic Advaita" stream in which insight must transform life rather than merely produce abstract metaphysical assent ^[6].

Western psychology developed under different intellectual conditions. William James described consciousness as an ongoing stream and treated attention, habit, emotion, and will as legitimate objects of disciplined psychological inquiry ^[7]. Freud's structural and dynamic account made conflict, defence, and unconscious motivation central to the explanation of thought and conduct ^[8]. Behaviourism then shifted emphasis from introspective entities to observable relations among behaviour, reinforcement, and environment ^[9]. Humanistic psychology restored subjective meaning and proposed that therapeutic change depends upon a relationship that supports congruence and growth ^[10]. Maslow extended this orientation toward self-actualisation and the study of healthy human possibility ^[11].

The cognitive turn again placed interpretation at the centre of psychological distress. Beck argued that systematic patterns of appraisal and belief help organise emotional disorders and can be examined and modified ^[12]. Bandura's social-cognitive theory added reciprocal interaction among person, behaviour, and environment, together with the self-regulatory importance of efficacy beliefs ^[13]. Transactional stress theory similarly proposed that the psychological effect of an event depends partly upon appraisal and coping resources, not upon the event alone ^[14]. Research on emotion regulation later differentiated the points at which attention, interpretation, expression, and action can modify an unfolding emotional response ^[15].

Contemporary contextual therapies created an especially useful bridge for comparison. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy seeks psychological flexibility by changing the person's relationship to private events rather than attempting to eliminate every unwanted thought ^[16]. The clinical development of mindfulness-based interventions translated contemplative attention into structured programmes while also acknowledging the importance of context, teacher competence, and conceptual precision ^[17]. Reviews of mindfulness interventions reported therapeutic promise but also called for stronger research designs ^[18]. Studies of dispositional mindfulness connected present-centred awareness with self-regulation and well-being ^[19], while mindfulness-based cognitive therapy used decentring to reduce the influence of recurrent depressive thinking ^[20]. Self-determination theory, although not a contemplative theory, contributes an account of autonomous motivation and human flourishing grounded in psychological needs ^[21].

Neuroscientific studies have associated meditation experience with differences in default-mode network activity and connectivity ^[22], and broader reviews have proposed attention control, emotion regulation, and self-awareness as interacting mechanisms while recognising substantial methodological limits ^[23]. Those limits are important. Critical reviews warn against exaggerated claims, vague definitions, weak controls, and the assumption that every contemplative practice is uniformly beneficial ^[24]. Mixed-methods research has also documented difficult or distressing meditation-related experiences, demonstrating the need for screening, contextual interpretation, and qualified support ^[25]. Against this background, a comparison between the Yogavāsiṣṭha and Western psychology is worthwhile only if it avoids two errors. The first is romantic equivalence: ancient metaphysical

teachings cannot simply be renamed as neuroscience or psychotherapy. The second is dismissive separation: differences of method do not prevent careful comparison of how each tradition understands construction, conditioning, identity, suffering, and change. The present study therefore asks where the two frameworks genuinely converge at the level of psychological process, where they diverge in their assumptions and goals, and how a responsible dialogue may enrich the study of mind without confusing liberation discourse with clinical evidence.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To explain the concept and functioning of mind in the Yogavāsiṣṭha.
2. To outline major Western psychological models relevant to cognition, selfhood, conditioning, and mental change.
3. To compare the two traditions across common analytical dimensions.
4. To identify genuine convergences without erasing ontological and methodological differences.
5. To formulate a responsible basis for dialogue between contemplative philosophy and psychological science.

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a conceptual-comparative and hermeneutic design. Its corpus consists of recognised presentations and historical studies of the Yogavāsiṣṭha/Mokṣopāya tradition and works representing functional, psychodynamic, behavioural, cognitive, humanistic, social-cognitive, emotion-regulation, and mindfulness-based psychology. It does not report an experiment, survey, or newly collected human-participant data.

The unit of analysis is the explanatory theme rather than an isolated Sanskrit term or a single Western school. Eight themes were selected: the status of mind, construction of experience, conditioning, selfhood, origin of suffering, means of change, ideal outcome, and standard of validation. Textual claims were first interpreted within their own traditions and then compared through functional questions such as: What produces distress? What sustains it? What can attention and inquiry change? What counts as freedom or health? Similar language was not treated as proof of conceptual identity. The analysis therefore distinguishes operational convergence from metaphysical equivalence and maintains the limits of a non-empirical conceptual study.

4. Conceptual Foundations

4.1 Mind in the Yogavāsiṣṭha

The Yogavāsiṣṭha does not treat mind as a fixed substance located inside an independently existing individual. Mind is better understood as the active movement of consciousness in the form of conceptualisation, intention, memory, differentiation, and desire. Terms such as manas, citta, saṅkalpa, and vāsanā occupy overlapping but context-sensitive roles. Taken together, they describe how a fluid field of experience becomes organised into “I,” “mine,” desired objects, feared outcomes, remembered injuries, anticipated futures, and apparently stable worlds.

The text's dream-like and story-within-story narratives loosen confidence in the immediate realism of mental constructions. Dream, imagination, memory, and waking perception are not declared identical in every practical respect; rather, they show that experience is mediated by cognition and identification. Bondage begins when mental contents and habits are taken as the final truth of the self.

Vāsanā may be read as the latent tendency that gives repeated direction to mental life. Past action and repeated identification produce dispositions; dispositions stimulate fresh thought and action; these actions reinforce the same dispositions. The resulting cycle resembles conditioning at a functional level, though the Yogavāsiṣṭha embeds it within a karmic and soteriological account. Desire is not condemned simply because pleasure exists. The problem is dependent identification: the felt necessity that fulfilment, security, or selfhood must come from a particular mental object.

Freedom is cultivated through self-effort, discrimination, dispassion, disciplined attention, association with wisdom, and inquiry into the nature of the experiencer. The aim is not cognitive blankness, emotional numbness, or withdrawal from ordinary responsibility. The ideal of jīvanmukti describes action continuing without binding appropriation. Mental functions may operate, but they no longer establish an ultimately separate ego. The decisive transformation is therefore a change in identity and ontological understanding, not only a reduction of symptoms.

4.2 Mind in Western Psychology

Western psychology has no single doctrine of mind. Functional psychology studies how attention, habit, memory, and action support adaptation. Psychodynamic theory interprets symptoms through conflict, defence, developmental history, and processes outside ordinary awareness. Behaviourism explains patterns through learning history and environmental contingencies. Cognitive psychology and cognitive therapy investigate schemas, attention, appraisal, memory, inference, and problem solving. Humanistic traditions emphasise lived experience, agency, authenticity, relationship, and growth. Social-cognitive approaches explain reciprocal influence among beliefs, behaviour, and environment. Later process-based approaches focus on modifiable mechanisms. Reappraisal changes assigned meaning; metacognitive awareness recognises thoughts as mental events; acceptance reduces futile struggle; defusion weakens the literal dominance of language; and mindfulness trains present-centred attention. These methods can resemble yogic observation, but their criterion is usually improved functioning, valued action, or measurable change.

The scientific discipline also imposes constraints absent from a liberation text. Constructs require operational definition; interventions require ethical review, outcome measurement, comparison conditions, and attention to adverse effects. Western psychology can describe correlates of attention or self-referential processing without resolving metaphysical questions about consciousness. Its strength is disciplined public testing; its limitation is that operational success does not by itself settle what mind or self ultimately is.

5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 5.1. Comparative thematic analysis of the mind in the Yogavāsiṣṭha and Western psychology

Analytical dimension	Yogavāsiṣṭha	Western psychology	Comparative interpretation
Status of mind	Dynamic ideation within consciousness; neither the ultimate Self nor an independently permanent entity	Set of cognitive, affective, behavioural, neural, and relational processes described by different models	Both reject a simple, unchanging mental substance, but only the Yogavāsiṣṭha places mind explicitly within non-dual consciousness
Construction of experience	Saṅkalpa and identification organise the experienced world of subject and object	Attention, appraisal, schema, prediction, memory, and language shape perceived meaning	Strong process-level convergence; ontological claims remain different
Conditioning	Vāsanā, habit, desire, and action form self-reinforcing cycles	Reinforcement, implicit learning, schemas, automatic thoughts, and habit loops maintain patterns	Both treat repetition as causally important and change as requiring interruption of established cycles
Selfhood	Ego is a constructed identification; witnessing consciousness is not reducible to mental content	Self may be narrative, embodied, social, developmental, agentic, or metacognitive	Western models often seek a coherent flexible self; the Yogavāsiṣṭha ultimately seeks freedom from separate-self identification
Suffering	Ignorance, craving, aversion, and reification of mental appearance create bondage	Maladaptive learning, conflict, biased appraisal, avoidance, dysregulation, and adverse context produce distress	Both locate suffering partly in the relation to experience, but psychology also foregrounds biological and social determinants
Method of change	Inquiry, discrimination, dispassion, meditation, ethical steadiness, and self-effort	Therapeutic relationship, exposure, behavioural change, cognitive restructuring, acceptance, skills, and environmental intervention	Overlap exists in attention and deconditioning; Western methods are diagnosis- and outcome-sensitive
Ideal outcome	Jīvanmukti: non-attached action grounded in liberating knowledge	Symptom reduction, adaptation, autonomy, integration, well-being, and valued functioning	The goals can support one another but are not interchangeable
Validation	Transformative insight, coherence of teaching, contemplative verification, and liberated conduct	Replicable observation, measurement, clinical outcomes, mechanism testing, and critical revision	Each uses a different epistemic standard; responsible dialogue requires preserving both distinctions and limits

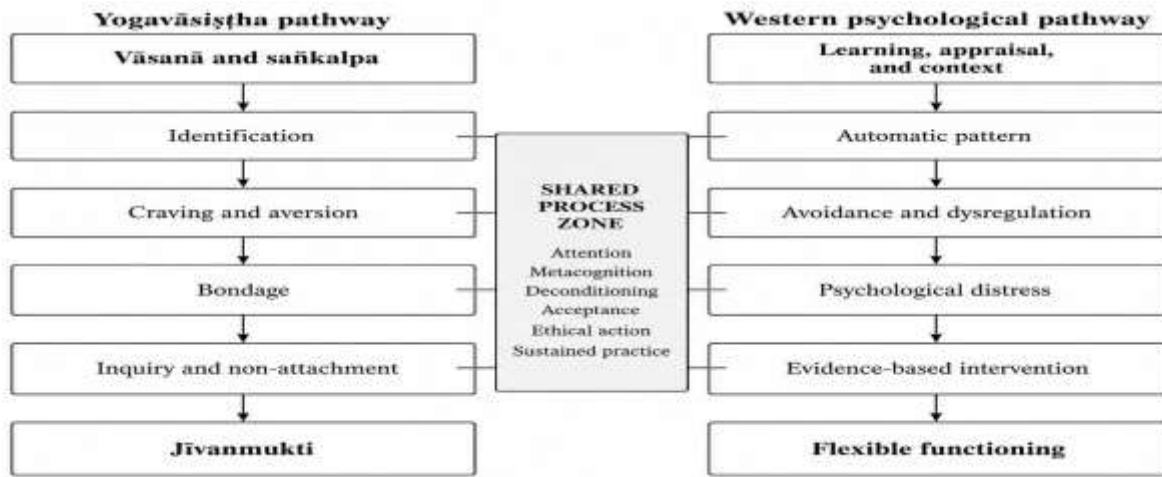


Figure 5.1. Comparative pathways of mental bondage/distress and transformation

Interpretation

Table 5.1 and Figure 5.1 show that the strongest comparison occurs at the level of process, not doctrine. Both traditions understand ordinary experience as organised rather than passively received. What a person notices, remembers, names, expects, and values influences emotional response and conduct. Both also explain persistence through loops: a disposition generates a familiar interpretation; that interpretation guides action; the consequence strengthens the disposition. Transformation therefore requires more than receiving information. It requires repeated practice that changes attention, interpretation, response, and identification.

5.1 Mental Construction and Appraisal

The Yogavāsishtha makes the constructive activity of mind unusually radical. Saṅkalpa does not merely add an opinion to a complete and neutral world; it participates in forming the subject-object structure through which plurality is experienced. Western cognitive theory is generally more modest. It shows that schemas and appraisals influence the meaning, salience, and emotional impact of events, but it does not normally infer that mind creates the ontological existence of the universe. The useful convergence is therefore phenomenological: a feared future, humiliating memory, or rigid self-judgement can dominate present experience because it is treated as reality rather than as a conditioned mental event.

The Yogavāsishtha should not be advertised as an ancient cognitive therapy, because its analysis is directed toward non-dual liberation. Conversely, cognitive therapy is not “positive thinking”; it tests interpretations against evidence and function. Mental framing matters profoundly, but metaphysical idealism, phenomenological construction, and testable cognitive mediation remain distinct.

5.2 Vāsanā, Habit, and Conditioning

Vāsanā and psychological conditioning share a family resemblance. Both explain why a pattern can arise before deliberate choice: the person is already inclined toward a familiar perception and response. In the Yogavāsishtha, latent tendencies sustain the cycle of desire, action, and bondage. In behavioural

and cognitive accounts, reinforcement histories, avoidance, attentional bias, and learned expectations make certain responses more probable. Each framework therefore rejects the idea that insight alone automatically changes life.

The difference is scope. Western psychology examines how biology, family, culture, trauma, and contingencies influence behaviour. The Yogavāsiṣṭha interprets tendencies within ignorance and liberation, seeking their exhaustion through understanding and non-attachment. Clinical psychology may instead modify a specific habit while preserving ordinary aims. Philosophical inquiry can address identity invested in a pattern, while behavioural methods specify triggers, consequences, and replacement actions.

5.3 The Self: Integration or De-identification

The deepest divergence concerns the self. Much of Western psychotherapy assumes that a person benefits from a stable, coherent, and compassionate sense of self. Treatment may strengthen agency, boundaries, autobiographical continuity, self-efficacy, and relational security. Even therapies that describe the self as contextual or narrative usually aim to improve the person's capacity to choose and function.

The Yogavāsiṣṭha uses a more radical strategy. It examines the "I" as an appropriating thought that claims body, memory, role, desire, and action. Inquiry does not merely replace a negative self-concept with a positive one; it questions whether any mental representation can be the ultimate knower. The practical result is not the destruction of personality but reduced ownership and reactivity. One can speak, decide, work, and care without making every event confirm or threaten a separate identity.

These aims should be sequenced carefully in real-world application. A person with severe trauma, dissociation, psychosis, unstable mood, or fragile self-organisation may require grounding, safety, medical assessment, and relational stability rather than intensified deconstruction of self. De-identification is not clinically identical to depersonalisation. The former is described as clarity with functional engagement; the latter may involve distress, unreality, and impairment. Western clinical safeguards are therefore essential when liberation language is translated into mental-health settings.

5.4 Emotion, Desire, and Regulation

The Yogavāsiṣṭha links emotional bondage to craving, aversion, expectation, and the demand that circumstances secure the ego. This can resemble reappraisal and acceptance: when an event is no longer interpreted as a final threat to self, emotional reactivity may decline. Yet the text's ideal is not suppression. Forced control can leave the underlying tendency intact. Stable freedom arises when the belief and identification feeding the reaction have been understood.

Western emotion-regulation theory helps make this process more precise. Intervention can occur by changing a situation, directing attention, revising appraisal, allowing emotion without avoidance, modulating expression, or choosing a different action. This precision corrects the vague instruction to "control the mind." It also shows that not every emotion is cognitive error. Fear may signal real danger; grief may express attachment and loss; anger may reveal injustice; anxiety may be intensified by physiology or social insecurity. Non-attachment should not become indifference to abuse, poverty, discrimination, or medical need.

5.5 Agency and Effort

Both traditions contain robust accounts of agency. The Yogavāsiṣṭha repeatedly values self-effort, disciplined inquiry, and the refusal to remain passively governed by tendency. Western approaches similarly cultivate self-regulation, behavioural activation, coping skills, autonomous motivation, and belief in one's capacity to act. In both, agency grows through practice rather than declaration.

However, agency is not isolated willpower. Western psychology demonstrates that opportunity, reinforcement, relationships, health, and social structure enable or constrain action. The Yogavāsiṣṭha adds that effort becomes freeing when it is not appropriated by anxious egoism. Their combined insight is that practice must be deliberate but not self-punitive: one changes conditions and behaviour while also questioning the compulsive identity that demands immediate perfection.

5.6 Outcomes and Standards of Knowledge

The Yogavāsiṣṭha evaluates mental transformation through freedom from binding identification, equanimity, clarity, and conduct within life. Western psychology evaluates change through reliable measures, observable function, symptom course, quality of life, and comparison with alternative explanations. These standards answer different questions. First-person contemplative insight can disclose the structure of experience, but it cannot by itself establish population-level clinical efficacy. A randomised trial can estimate an intervention's average effect, but it cannot decide the ultimate nature of consciousness.

The most defensible dialogue is methodologically plural but careful. Contemplative reports may generate hypotheses about attention and reactivity. Research can operationalise limited processes, test interventions, identify contraindications, and document variability. Philosophical analysis can then ask whether the operational definition preserved or distorted the original concept.

5.7 Implications for Psychological Practice and Education

The comparison supports a modest integrative framework. First, distinguish awareness from mental content: "a thought is present" is different from "this thought is the whole truth." Second, map the conditioning loop through triggers, interpretations, bodily responses, actions, and consequences. Third, cultivate inquiry that is evidence-sensitive and existentially serious: What is known directly? What is inferred? What identity is being defended? Fourth, connect insight with ethical and behavioural practice so that non-attachment does not become passivity. Fifth, match contemplative intensity to the person's stability, culture, diagnosis, and support.

This framework is educational rather than a substitute for treatment. Yogavāsiṣṭha-based reflection may deepen philosophical counselling, values education, and contemplative studies, but clinical claims require appropriately designed research. Teachers should avoid promising enlightenment as a cure, interpreting every disorder as weak will or ignorance, or encouraging people to discontinue professional care. Western psychology, for its part, should avoid extracting techniques while ignoring the ethical, metaphysical, and pedagogical context that gave them meaning.

6. Conclusion

The Yogavāsiṣṭha and Western psychology meet in recognising that mind is patterned and transformable. Both show that attention, interpretation, memory, expectation, and habit shape

experience; both recognise that automatic patterns can create suffering; and both value disciplined practice.

Their differences are equally important. The *Yogavāsiṣṭha* is a liberation-oriented philosophical and contemplative text. It ultimately interprets mind as a movement within non-dual consciousness and seeks freedom from identification with a separate ego. Western psychology is an internally diverse scientific and clinical enterprise. It usually brackets metaphysical conclusions and aims at measurable relief, adaptation, autonomy, integration, and well-being. *Jīvanmukti* cannot therefore be treated as another clinical outcome, and a neural or behavioural correlate cannot be treated as proof of non-duality.

A responsible synthesis preserves the asymmetry. The *Yogavāsiṣṭha* contributes a penetrating account of how ideation becomes identity and how knowledge may permit action without bondage. Western psychology contributes operational clarity, multi-level causal models, therapeutic relationships, outcome testing, and safeguards for vulnerability and adverse effects. Together they encourage an enlarged study of mind—one that takes first-person experience seriously, tests limited claims publicly, respects cultural and philosophical context, and refuses both reductionism and uncritical spiritualisation. The result is not a merged doctrine but a disciplined dialogue about how human beings construct experience, become trapped in their constructions, and cultivate greater freedom.

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