

Exploring Consciousness And The Subconscious Mind: A Comparative Study Of The Panchkosha Theory And Freud's Unconscious

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Introduction

In Eastern philosophy, especially within the Vedantic paradigm, the Panchkosha hypothesis provides a comprehensive and stratified interpretation of human consciousness, transitioning from the concrete physical body to the most refined levels of pure awareness. This conception originates from ancient Indian scriptures such as the Taittiriya Upanishad and depicts the self as a multifaceted entity, encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual qualities. Conversely, Western philosophy, especially in the early 20th century, was significantly influenced by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic framework, which presented a conflict-laden perspective of the unconscious. Freud's approach conceptualized the mind as a battleground for repressed impulses and unsolved conflicts, frequently disturbing the balance of the conscious self. The inquiry into our comprehension of the subconscious is fundamental to grasping human nature. Eastern and Western philosophies, despite their differences, have both sought to elucidate the intricate nature of the subconscious to understand the foundations of human behavior, psychological turmoil, and spiritual growth. In Eastern traditions, the subconscious is frequently viewed as a fundamental component of a spiritual continuum, yet in Western psychoanalysis, it is considered a cause of psychological conflict. The tension between integration and fragmentation is not only theoretical; it immediately influences our approach to mental health, personal development, and the ultimate objectives of human existence. Due to the significance of these models in both ancient spiritual traditions and contemporary psychology theory, they continue to hold relevance today as they did upon their inception.

This paper aims to critically analyze and contrast the integrative perspective of the subconscious in the Panchkosha theory with Freud's conflict-oriented interpretation of the unconscious. This study investigates the philosophical and practical ramifications of each paradigm to reveal how these contrasting frameworks shape our comprehension of the mind and how their findings may be integrated into contemporary psychology and holistic mental health approaches. The comparative analysis will elucidate how the Panchkosha model's emphasis on oneness and transcendence diverges from Freud's concentration on repression and internal conflict, providing a more nuanced view of the subconscious's influence on human behavior and mental well-being.

This study is centered around the following research inquiries:

- What are the conceptualizations of the subconscious or unconscious mind in the Panchkosha theory and Freud's psychoanalytic model?
- What conceptual difficulties and divergences emerge from juxtaposing the integrative approach of the Panchkosha model with Freud's conflict-oriented perspective?
- What insights may this juxtaposition provide on the wider context of psychological recovery, spiritual development, and mental well-being?

This study will critically analyze these topics to enhance our comprehension of the two theories and investigate their potential interrelation.

The Panchkosha Theory: A Comprehensive Understanding of Consciousness

The Panchkosha thought, originating from ancient Indian philosophy, is derived from the Taittiriya Upanishad, a fundamental work in Vedantic thought. It provides a deep and complex comprehension of human existence, envisioning awareness as a progression through five sheaths or koshas. The koshas symbolize multiple realms of existence, extending from the concrete physical body to the most nuanced aspect of consciousness. The Panchkosha paradigm embodies the Vedantic perspective, perceiving human experience as profoundly interrelated and ultimately indistinguishable from universal consciousness. Each kosha, though seemingly a distinct layer, is inextricably interconnected with the others, forming a comprehensive and unified perspective of existence.

The Annamaya Kosha, the initial layer, signifies the physical body, the most concrete facet of our existence. This kosha is sustained by food (anna) and embodies our sensory experiences, physiological requirements, and biological functions. This layer is mostly linked to the material realm, focusing on survival and bodily well-being. Beyond this exists the Pranamaya Kosha, the energy or vital body. This kosha pertains to the circulation of prana (life energy), which supports not only physical existence but also the emotional and cognitive functions of the human. The breath, connecting the body

to deeper layers of consciousness, is a fundamental aspect of this kosha, representing the link between the physical and more subtle dimensions.

The Manomaya Kosha encompasses the intellect and emotions. This kosha pertains to cognition, perception, and emotional reactions. This is where the mind engages with the world, interpreting sensory information and generating emotional responses. The Manomaya Kosha is pivotal to the operation of the subconscious, containing our cognitive processes and emotional imprints. Beyond the mental-emotional body is the Vijnanamaya Kosha, the sheath of intellect or wisdom. This kosha pertains to elevated knowledge, discernment, and intuitive comprehension. It signifies the intellectual capacity that surpasses mere understanding, enabling reflection on profound truths and directing the individual towards spiritual enlightenment.

The Anandamaya Kosha, the sheath of bliss, signifies the most profound and subtle layer of existence. This kosha transcends ordinary pleasure, representing a profound feeling of union with global consciousness. Here, the self surpasses the confines of individuality and perceives its unity with the cosmos. The Anandamaya Kosha is seen as the pinnacle of spiritual practice, wherein the distinctions between the ego and the cosmos dissipate, leading to the realization of pure consciousness.

The Subconscious inside the Panchkosha Framework

The Panchkosha theory posits that the subconscious is predominantly located inside the Manomaya and Vijnanamaya koshas. The layers of the self encompass mental impressions, emotional patterns, and intellectual programming. The Manomaya Kosha serves as the reservoir for samskaras, or mental imprints, generated by experiences, actions, and thoughts. These samskaras influence an individual's subconscious behavioral patterns, frequently functioning beyond the threshold of conscious awareness. The Manomaya Kosha is the layer through which we interact with the world on emotional and cerebral levels, housing the subconscious that contains ingrained ideas, anxieties, and wants that shape our responses and choices.

The Vijnanamaya Kosha enhances the comprehension of the subconscious by integrating intellect and advanced reasoning. The Manomaya Kosha is more reactive and linked to emotional experiences, whereas the Vijnanamaya Kosha embodies a profound intellectual processing that influences one's worldview and ethical comprehension. The subconscious mind is influenced by both prior emotional experiences and the knowledge and wisdom gained during life. In this kosha, the subconscious starts to connect with elevated levels of consciousness, transitioning from instinctual reflexes to more intentional, considered responses.

In the Panchkosha model, it is essential to note that the subconscious is not regarded as a realm of repression or conflict, contrary to its portrayal in Western psychology, especially in Freud's framework. The subconscious is a fundamental component of the self's comprehensive development. The cognitive and intellectual frameworks inside the Manomaya and Vijnanamaya koshas are deemed crucial for an individual's spiritual and psychological development. Engaging with these layers facilitates the transformation of subconscious inclinations, progressively aligning them with elevated consciousness.

Spiritual Advancement and the Function of the Subconscious

In the Panchkosha concept, the subconscious is integral to the individual's spiritual progression. The Panchkosha idea incorporates the subconscious into the journey of self-realization, rather than perceiving it as an entity to be controlled or suppressed. The exploration of the koshas entails a process of purification and enlightenment, wherein each layer is systematically purified, guiding the individual toward the ultimate comprehension of the Anandamaya Kosha, or joy sheath. This approach perceives the subconscious as an interface to elevated consciousness rather than an impediment to spiritual advancement.

Spiritual advancement, as per the Panchkosha paradigm, entails identifying and altering the subconscious patterns contained within the Manomaya and Vijnanamaya koshas. This process is frequently characterized as a transition from ignorance (avidya) to knowledge (vidya). By engaging in techniques like meditation, self-inquiry, and ethical living, an individual can commence the dissolution of negative samskaras and subconscious inclinations, facilitating the emergence of elevated levels of awareness. The change of the subconscious mind is a progressive process, revealing deeper layers of training to conscious consciousness over time.

Sri Aurobindo, a notable 20th-century philosopher and spiritual educator, elaborates on these concepts by highlighting the significance of the Vijnanamaya Kosha in facilitating spiritual advancement. He contends that authentic spiritual advancement necessitates the intellect's alignment with the profound realities of reality, surpassing superficial cognitive comprehension. Aurobindo posits that the change of the subconscious is essential to the comprehensive process of unifying all levels of awareness into a cohesive entirety. He characterizes the subconscious as possessing both the capacity for emancipation and the impediments to it, contingent upon one's approach via spiritual practice.

The Panchkosha philosophy conceptualizes the subconscious not as an issue to be resolved, but as an essential component of human evolution, guiding the individual towards elevated states of consciousness and oneness with the divine. By engaging with the subconscious through spiritual practices, the individual progresses toward a more integrated and

enlightened existence, wherein the profound levels of consciousness are harmonized and aligned with the ultimate truth of existence.

Freud's Psychoanalytic Framework: The Unconscious as a Domain of Conflict

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory presented an innovative model of the mind, categorizing it into three tiers: the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious. The conscious mind encompasses thoughts and experiences of which we are actively aware, but the preconscious contains memories that can be retrieved with effort. The unconscious, the most profound and essential aspect, serves as a concealed repository of suppressed wants, fears, and traumatic events. Freud compared this structure to an iceberg, with the unconscious being the extensive, hidden segment that significantly impacts behavior.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud articulated that the unconscious manifests itself through dreams, which he considered symbolic representations of repressed desires. These desires are suppressed and altered by the mind's defense mechanisms to shield the individual from direct confrontation. Freud's concept of the unconscious was groundbreaking in its focus on concealed psychic processes, primarily influenced by fundamental instincts and unresolved tensions between societal expectations and individual needs.

Freud elaborated on this notion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), presenting the notions of *Eros* (the life instinct) and *Thanatos* (the death instinct). He posited that the unconscious is driven not just by the pursuit of pleasure and survival but also by self-destructive inclinations. This notion intensified Freud's understanding of the unconscious as a conflictual arena where opposing impulses compete for manifestation, generating psychological tension and influencing behavior.

Mechanisms of Repression and the Function of the Unconscious

Repression is an essential principle in Freud's theory, wherein unwanted thoughts and urges are expelled from conscious awareness and relegated to the unconscious. Freud regarded repression as a form of defense that safeguards the individual from distressing memories while at the same time generating tension, since these suppressed impulses continue to strive for expression. The unconscious exerts a significant influence on behavior through indirect processes, including dreams, slip of tongue and neurotic symptoms.

Freud noted that these unconscious tensions frequently manifest in distorted or symbolic representations. Neurotic habits and inexplicable concerns are frequently linked to suppressed memories or unresolved childhood traumas. Psychoanalytic treatment, as posited by Freud, involves the retrieval of repressed material into the conscious mind, enabling patients to address and reconcile their internal challenges.

Subsequent theorists such as Carl Jung and Jacques Lacan elaborated on Freud's model of the unconscious. In 1964, Jung established the concept of the collective unconscious, positing that it encompasses archetypes and universal symbols common to all humanity, in contrast to Freud's notion of the personal unconscious. Jung saw the unconscious as encompassing both repressed content and the capacity for development and individuation. Lacan (1977), reinterpreting Freud's concepts via structural linguistics, posited that the unconscious is organized akin to a language, with unconscious desires formed and influenced by linguistic structures. Lacan underscored the essential function of language in constructing the unconscious and influencing an individual's relationship with their desires.

Divergences in Philosophy and Theory

The essential distinction between the Panchkosha theory and Freud's psychoanalytic model resides in their conflicting philosophical underpinnings. The Panchkosha hypothesis, originating from the Vedantic tradition, perceives the subconscious as an integral component of a harmonious continuum. This idea delineates five sheaths (koshas), each symbolizing increasingly complex layers of human existence, ranging from the physical body to the deepest spiritual dimension. The subconscious, located within the Manomaya (mental-emotional) and Vijnanamaya (intellectual) koshas, is essential to the spiritual development of the self, functioning not as a source of conflict but as a component of the self's advancement toward higher consciousness.

Freud's approach, however, perceives the unconscious as a reservoir of repressed wants, fears, and unresolved conflicts that stand in opposition to the conscious consciousness. This dualistic perspective highlights the fragmentation of the ego, as unconscious forces influence action in manners frequently contrary to conscious objectives. Freud's theory, grounded in the dualistic heritage of Western thought, illustrates a cultural inclination to perceive the self as divided between rational and instinctive forces, resulting in internal conflicts that are expressed through dreams, verbal slips, and neuroses.

This disparity between holistic integration (Panchkosha) and internal conflict (Freud) highlights significant cultural distinctions: Eastern non-dualism, which pursues unity and spiritual transcendence, in contrast to Western dualism, which frequently emphasizes the reconciliation of fractured components of the self.

Relevance to Spiritual Growth and Psychology

The philosophical divergences between Freud's psychoanalysis and the Panchkosha theory result in contrasting methodologies in psychology and mental health. Freud's theory, emphasizing repression and conflict, has profoundly impacted Western clinical psychology. Psychoanalytic treatment, cognitive-behavioral interventions, and various

therapeutic approaches frequently seek to reveal suppressed unconscious content, addressing internal conflicts to attain psychological equilibrium.

The Panchkosha paradigm provides a comprehensive viewpoint that encompasses not only psychological treatment but also spiritual growth. This philosophy posits that mental health constitutes but one aspect of human flourishing, with spiritual enlightenment as the paramount objective. The subconscious, instead of simply containing repressed content, possesses the capacity for spiritual development. Practices such as meditation, mindfulness, and ethical behavior facilitate the purification of samskaras, enabling the individual to advance toward a state of elevated consciousness. Mental well-being is inherently linked to spiritual development within the Panchkosha framework, necessitating that therapy methods encompass both aspects.

Freud's paradigm regards psychological recovery as the resolution of internal conflict, but the Panchkosha theory defines the ultimate objective as the transcendence of the individual ego. This disparity highlights distinct assumptions on the objective of human development: Freud emphasizes the regulation of the interplay between the conscious and unconscious mind, whereas the Panchkosha philosophy aspires to transcend both to attain unity with universal consciousness.

Neuroscience and Contemporary Perspectives

Recent advancements in neuroscience have created opportunities for the synthesis of Eastern and Western viewpoints on the subconscious. Investigations into neuroplasticity and mindfulness indicate that the brain can be reconfigured by experience, especially meditation techniques that closely correspond with the Panchkosha theory's focus on conscious evolution. Researchers such as Francisco Varela (1991) and Davidson and Goleman (2017) have investigated the capacity of mindfulness and meditation—originating from Eastern traditions—to modify brain function, reshape subconscious patterns, and enhance emotional control. This corresponds with the Panchkosha theory's perspective that subconscious inclinations can be refined and assimilated into elevated levels of consciousness.

Mindfulness-based therapies, prevalent in contemporary therapeutic methods, represent a convergence between Freud's psychoanalytic approach and the Panchkosha idea. Mindfulness enables individuals to examine their subconscious processes nonjudgmentally, revealing repressed material akin to Freud's focus on finding unconscious content. Mindfulness embodies the entire focus of the Panchkosha model, providing a method for altering subconscious tendencies and aligning them with spiritual development, rather than merely addressing psychological difficulties.

Whereas Freud's model and the Panchkosha theory provide fundamentally divergent perspectives on the subconscious, both yield significant insights into mental processes. Freud's emphasis on conflict and repression establishes a framework for comprehending psychological problems, whereas the Panchkosha theory presents a more holistic perspective of the subconscious as a component of a continuum leading to spiritual enlightenment. By examining these two models concurrently and incorporating insights from contemporary neuroscience, we achieve a more holistic comprehension of the human psyche that encompasses both psychological well-being and spiritual growth.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the philosophical and practical differences between the Panchkosha theory and Freud's psychoanalytic model, illustrating the divergent Eastern and Western approaches to comprehending the subconscious. The Panchkosha theory perceives the subconscious as a cohesive element of human growth, essential for spiritual advancement, whereas Freud's approach characterizes the unconscious as a realm of discord and suppression, influencing human conduct in frequently disruptive manners. These disparities illustrate overarching cultural distinctions—non-dualistic unity in Eastern philosophy contrasted with the dualistic tension evident in Freud's theories. Nonetheless, there are points of convergence: both models underscore the significant impact of subconscious processes on the conscious mind, providing complementary perspectives on the intricacies of human behavior.

This paper indicates that integrating aspects of the Panchkosha philosophy into contemporary psychology may enhance holistic therapeutic techniques. This integrative approach could enhance mental health care by addressing both the psychological and spiritual aspects of human experience. An interdisciplinary comprehension of consciousness, shaped by Eastern and Western viewpoints, presents the opportunity for more profound and subtle therapies.

Future research ought to investigate the integration of these theories into modern mental health approaches, especially through multidisciplinary studies encompassing psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience. This integration offers a deeper comprehension of awareness, with significant ramifications for individual and communal well-being.

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