



Consciousness, Cognition, And Selfhood: A Dialogue Between The Yogavāsiṣṭha And Western Psychological Thought

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Abstract

This article develops a comparative dialogue between the Yogavāsiṣṭha and major strands of Western psychological thought concerning consciousness, cognition, and selfhood. The Yogavāsiṣṭha presents mind not merely as an inner faculty but as a world-forming movement shaped by intention (saṅkalpa), latent dispositions (vāsanā), memory, and misidentification. Western psychology, by contrast, has approached mind through psychoanalytic, cognitive, humanistic, phenomenological, neuroscientific, and predictive-processing frameworks. Using a qualitative, conceptual-comparative method, the study examines five points of contact: the constructed character of the personal self, the role of habitual conditioning, the relation between cognition and suffering, the importance of meta-awareness, and the possibility of psychological transformation. The analysis finds substantial functional convergence between the Yogavāsiṣṭha's account of vāsanā-driven experience and contemporary ideas of schemas, automatic thought, self-models, and predictive inference. It also identifies an important affinity between the text's practice of witnessing mental events and modern concepts such as decentering, mindfulness, and cognitive defusion. However, the traditions remain philosophically distinct. The Yogavāsiṣṭha treats consciousness as foundational and liberation as recognition of non-dual awareness, whereas most Western psychological theories remain methodologically naturalistic and define successful change in terms of adaptation, symptom reduction, agency, or well-being. The article argues that a responsible dialogue should preserve these differences rather than collapse them into superficial equivalence. Such a dialogue can enrich contemporary psychology by supplying a process-oriented account of selfhood, a refined vocabulary of conditioning, and an ethically grounded model of freedom from compulsive identification.

Keywords: Yogavāsiṣṭha; consciousness; cognition; selfhood; vāsanā; mindfulness; cognitive psychology; non-duality; self-model; psychological transformation

1. Introduction

Questions about consciousness, thought, identity, and suffering lie at the centre of both classical Indian philosophy and modern psychology. Yet the two traditions often begin from different assumptions. Contemporary psychology generally treats mental life as a set of processes that can be described through behaviour, cognition, development, interpersonal relations, or neural activity. The Yogavāsiṣṭha, a philosophically rich Sanskrit work framed as a dialogue between the sage Vasiṣṭha



and Prince Rāma, treats the mind as the decisive medium through which bondage, world-experience, and liberation arise. Its narratives repeatedly examine how imagination, memory, desire, fear, and latent tendencies organise a lived world. For this reason, the text is not only metaphysical; it is also a sustained inquiry into the dynamics of human experience (Atreya, 1936; Dasgupta, 1932; Venkatesananda, 1993).

A comparative study is valuable because recent Western theories increasingly describe perception and selfhood as constructed, inferential, embodied, and dynamic rather than as transparent representations of a fixed reality. Cognitive therapy identifies the role of interpretations and automatic thoughts in emotional distress (Beck, 1976). Social-cognitive theory describes persons as agents who regulate behaviour through beliefs, goals, and reciprocal interaction (Bandura, 2001). Phenomenological and enactive approaches emphasise the embodied organisation of experience (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991), while neuroscience investigates self-referential processing as a distributed function rather than a single inner entity (Northoff et al., 2006). Predictive-processing accounts go further by proposing that perception depends on continuously updated models that anticipate sensory input (Clark, 2013; Friston, 2010). These developments create a serious, though limited, basis for dialogue with the Yogavāsiṣṭha's analysis of mind-created appearance.

The purpose of comparison is not to claim that an ancient soteriological text anticipated modern neuroscience, nor to translate every Sanskrit category into a clinical term. Such claims erase historical and methodological differences. Instead, this article asks how the Yogavāsiṣṭha and Western psychology illuminate recurring human problems: Why does the self appear stable despite constant change? How do habitual patterns shape perception? Why do thoughts become sources of suffering? What allows a person to observe cognition without being dominated by it? By placing these questions in dialogue, the article seeks conceptual enrichment rather than forced identity.

2. Aim, Research Questions, and Method

The article has three aims: first, to clarify the Yogavāsiṣṭha's model of consciousness, mind, and personhood; second, to compare this model with selected Western psychological approaches; and third, to identify possibilities and limits for contemporary psychological application. The guiding questions are: (1) How does the Yogavāsiṣṭha explain the formation of the empirical self? (2) Which Western theories offer functionally comparable accounts of cognition and identity? (3) Where do the traditions converge, and where do they remain incompatible?

A qualitative conceptual-comparative method is used. Primary attention is given to English translations and scholarly studies of the Yogavāsiṣṭha, especially the translations by Venkatesananda (1984, 1993) and historical-philosophical analyses by Atreya (1936), Mainkar (1977), Dasgupta (1932), and Chapple and Chakrabarti (2015). These materials are read alongside representative works from psychoanalytic, cognitive, humanistic, phenomenological, contemplative, and neuroscientific psychology. The comparison proceeds by identifying functional themes rather than assuming lexical equivalence. Thus, vāsanā is compared with learned dispositions and schemas only at the level of its role in shaping experience; it is not reduced to either concept. Similarly, the witnessing of thought is compared with meta-awareness and decentering without treating them as metaphysically identical.



3. Consciousness and Mind in the Yogavāsiṣṭha

3.1 Mind as a World-Forming Process

The Yogavāsiṣṭha repeatedly presents mind (manas or citta) as an active process that projects distinctions, sustains narratives, and confers reality upon its own constructions. The world encountered by an individual is therefore inseparable from the modes through which consciousness is conditioned. Dream stories, imagined cities, multiple worlds, and altered temporal sequences are not decorative fantasies; they are philosophical devices that weaken naïve confidence in the obviousness of ordinary experience. The text's concern is not simply whether the external world exists, but how experience becomes compelling through cognition, memory, expectation, and identification (Mainkar, 1977; Venkatesananda, 1984).

The term saṅkalpa is especially important. It can indicate conceptual determination, imaginative construction, volitional projection, or the mind's tendency to form and sustain a particular world of meaning. When repeated, such constructions acquire emotional force and behavioural continuity. The person then experiences a thought-created interpretation as an unquestionable fact. This account resembles, at a functional level, the cognitive view that appraisal mediates emotional response. Beck (1976) argues that distress is shaped not only by events but also by the meanings assigned to them. The Yogavāsiṣṭha broadens the claim: the entire field of personal bondage is organised through the mind's unexamined constructions.

3.2 Vāsanā, Habit, and the Continuity of Personality

Vāsanā refers to latent tendencies, inclinations, and traces that predispose the mind toward recurring patterns. These tendencies link past experience to present perception, generating continuity in personality and desire. They are neither merely conscious beliefs nor fixed substances. They operate as dynamic biases that make certain thoughts, emotions, and actions more likely. A person repeatedly interprets experience through familiar tendencies, and the resulting actions reinforce the very patterns from which they arose. The Yogavāsiṣṭha therefore offers a recursive account of conditioning: cognition produces action, action strengthens disposition, and disposition shapes future cognition (Atreya, 1936; Venkatesananda, 1993).

This model helps explain why intellectual agreement alone does not produce liberation. One may accept that fear is exaggerated, desire is unstable, or identity is constructed, yet continue to react automatically. Transformation requires the weakening of the affective and habitual energy of vāsanās. The text combines inquiry, disciplined attention, ethical conduct, dispassion, and contemplative insight because conditioning operates across cognitive, emotional, and behavioural levels. In contemporary terms, the Yogavāsiṣṭha distinguishes propositional knowledge from embodied reorganisation.

3.3 Selfhood, Ego, and Witnessing Consciousness

The empirical 'I' arises when consciousness identifies with bodily, emotional, mnemonic, and social processes. Ahaṁkāra, the I-making function, organises experience around ownership: my body, my thought, my success, my injury, my history. The Yogavāsiṣṭha does not deny the practical usefulness of personal identity, but it rejects the assumption that this identity is ultimate. The ordinary self is a



provisional pattern generated within consciousness. Suffering intensifies when this pattern is treated as independent, permanent, and complete.

Liberating knowledge involves a shift from identification with mental contents to recognition of the awareness in which those contents appear. This is not simple dissociation or emotional withdrawal. The ideal is *jīvanmukti*, freedom while living, in which a person continues to act in the world without compulsive attachment to a fixed ego. Chapple and Chakrabarti (2015) emphasise that the text's non-dual insight can coexist with moral and practical engagement. Awareness does not eliminate action; it changes the basis from which action is performed.

4. Western Psychological Approaches to Mind and Self

4.1 From Depth Psychology to the Cognitive Turn

Western psychology has never possessed a single theory of the mind. Psychoanalytic traditions stressed conflict, repression, unconscious motivation, and the layered character of personality. Freud's structural account distinguished the ego from deeper instinctual and moral forces, thereby challenging the belief that conscious intention fully governs behaviour (Freud, 1961). Jung expanded the psyche beyond personal memory through archetypal and collective dimensions (Jung, 1959). Although these theories differ sharply from the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, they share a suspicion of the transparent ego: the conscious 'I' does not know all the processes that shape it.

The cognitive revolution shifted attention toward information processing, memory, categorisation, problem solving, and mental representation (Neisser, 1967). Cognitive therapy translated this shift into a model of psychological suffering in which automatic thoughts and underlying schemas influence emotion and behaviour (Beck, 1976). The relevance to the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* is not metaphysical but practical. Both approaches hold that a person's experience is shaped by interpretive patterns and that change requires learning to detect and revise those patterns. However, cognitive therapy generally aims at more accurate and adaptive cognition, whereas the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* ultimately questions the identification that makes any cognition the basis of an enduring self.

4.2 Humanistic, Phenomenological, and Enactive Perspectives

Humanistic psychology placed subjective experience, meaning, and growth at the centre of psychological inquiry. Rogers (1961) described distress as emerging from incongruence between lived experience and a rigid self-concept, while therapeutic change required openness, acceptance, and a less defensive relation to experience. This emphasis resonates with the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*'s critique of fixed identity, although Rogers retains a developmental and relational account of personhood rather than a non-dual ontology.

Phenomenological and enactive approaches reject the idea that cognition is merely internal computation detached from the body and world. Varela et al. (1991) argue that mind emerges through embodied engagement and that first-person disciplined inquiry can contribute to cognitive science. Gallagher (2000) distinguishes a minimal self—the immediate sense of embodied subjectivity—from a narrative self constructed across memory, language, and social relations. This distinction is especially useful for comparison. The *Yogavāsiṣṭha*'s critique is directed mainly toward the reified narrative and



appropriative self, yet its final position also exceeds the minimal embodied self by grounding experience in non-dual consciousness.

4.3 Self-Models, Predictive Processing, and Neuroscience

Contemporary cognitive neuroscience increasingly treats the self as an organised pattern of processes rather than a single inner controller. Neuroimaging research associates self-referential processing with cortical midline structures, while cautioning that no isolated brain region constitutes the whole self (Northoff et al., 2006). Metzinger (2003) proposes that the experienced self is a transparent phenomenal self-model: the system experiences the model's content but not the modelling process itself. Damasio (1999) similarly describes layers of self-processes grounded in bodily regulation, feeling, and autobiographical memory.

Predictive-processing theories describe the brain as maintaining generative models that anticipate sensory causes and update themselves through prediction error (Clark, 2013; Friston, 2010). Perception is therefore not a passive copy of the world but an active, constrained inference. This framework offers a striking functional parallel with the Yogavāsiṣṭha's claim that prior tendencies organise present appearance. Yet the difference is decisive: predictive processing remains a theory of biological cognition, whereas the Yogavāsiṣṭha treats consciousness as ontologically prior to mind and world. Functional similarity should not be confused with metaphysical agreement.

5. A Comparative Dialogue

Table 1. Comparative Framework of Mind and Selfhood

Dimension	Yogavāsiṣṭha	Western Psychological Thought
Basic unit	Consciousness appearing as conditioned mind	Cognitive, affective, behavioural, interpersonal, and neural processes
Empirical self	Ahaṁkāra: provisional I-making and appropriation	Self-concept, narrative identity, minimal self, or self-model
Conditioning	Vāsanā and repeated saṅkalpa	Schemas, habits, learning histories, priors, and automatic thoughts
Perception	Experience shaped by mental construction	Active interpretation, embodied inference, predictive processing
Suffering	Identification with thought, desire, and duality	Maladaptive appraisal, conflict, avoidance, dysregulation, or rigid self-models
Method of change	Inquiry, dispassion, meditation, ethical action, witnessing	Psychotherapy, metacognition, exposure, acceptance, mindfulness, behavioural change



Goal	Jīvanmukti: freedom while living	Adaptation, symptom reduction, agency, integration, and well-being
Ontology	Consciousness is foundational and non-dual	Usually naturalistic, pluralistic, and methodologically empirical

5.1 The Self as Construction Rather than Substance

The strongest convergence concerns the rejection of a simple, unchanging ego. William James (1890) distinguished the stream of consciousness from the objects appropriated as ‘mine,’ already suggesting that selfhood contains multiple functions. Later theories differentiate embodied, autobiographical, social, and reflective selves (Damasio, 1999; Gallagher, 2000). The Yogavāsīṣṭha likewise treats the empirical person as an assembled continuity produced by memory, desire, bodily identification, and narrative repetition. In both traditions, the self is better understood as an activity of organisation than as a hidden object.

The implications, however, differ. Western psychology often seeks a flexible and coherent self rather than the transcendence of self-identification. Even theories that describe selfhood as model-based usually preserve the functional necessity of a self-model for action. The Yogavāsīṣṭha acknowledges practical identity but regards freedom as insight into its non-ultimate status. Therefore, the traditions agree that the ego is constructed, but they disagree about what, if anything, remains fundamental when construction is seen through.

5.2 Vāsanā, Schemas, and Predictive Habit

The concept of vāsanā can deepen psychological discussions of habit because it integrates cognition, affect, motivation, and identity. A schema is often described as an organised cognitive structure, while a habit is a learned behavioural tendency. Vāsanā includes both and adds an existential dimension: the tendency not only shapes what one thinks and does but also what kind of world appears meaningful. This resembles predictive accounts in which prior expectations influence perception, but it also includes ethical and motivational orientation.

The comparison suggests a circular model. Prior dispositions generate selective attention and interpretation; these produce emotions and actions; repeated actions stabilise identity; identity then protects the original dispositions. Bandura’s (2001) account of reciprocal determinism and agency offers a Western parallel because person, behaviour, and environment continuously influence one another. The Yogavāsīṣṭha adds that liberation requires interrupting the entire loop through insight and non-attachment, not merely replacing one content with another.

5.3 Meta-Awareness, Mindfulness, and Cognitive Defusion

A second major convergence lies in the capacity to observe thoughts as events rather than facts. Contemporary mindfulness models define practice partly through sustained attention to present experience and an open, non-reactive orientation (Bishop et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy similarly uses cognitive defusion to reduce literal attachment to thought, allowing behaviour to be guided by values rather than by every mental event (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). The Yogavāsīṣṭha’s contemplative inquiry performs a related function: thoughts, emotions, and identities are recognised as passing modifications within awareness.



Neuroscientific studies provide cautious support for the psychological importance of such practices. Experienced meditators show differences in default-mode network activity and connectivity associated with reduced mind-wandering and self-referential elaboration (Brewer et al., 2011). Meta-analyses also suggest that meditation practices engage partially distinct neural systems and can produce modest improvements in stress-related outcomes, although methods and effect sizes vary (Fox et al., 2016; Goyal et al., 2014). These findings do not prove the Yogavāsiṣṭha's metaphysics, but they demonstrate that training one's relationship to thought can have measurable psychological correlates.

5.4 Consciousness: Foundational Reality or Emergent Function?

The deepest disagreement concerns consciousness itself. In the Yogavāsiṣṭha, consciousness is not a product contained within an independently existing material world. It is the condition under which mind, person, and world become manifest. The distinction between pure awareness and conditioned mind is therefore ontological as well as experiential. Most Western psychology, including contemplative neuroscience, adopts methodological naturalism: consciousness is studied through report, behaviour, computation, embodiment, and neural organisation. Even when the explanatory problem remains unresolved, the discipline generally avoids treating non-dual awareness as a metaphysical ground.

This difference protects the dialogue from false equivalence. A predictive model is not the same as māyā, a self-model is not identical with ahaṁkāra, and reduced default-mode activity is not liberation. At the same time, the Western study of self-modelling can clarify the functional mechanisms through which identification becomes stable, while the Yogavāsiṣṭha can challenge psychology to examine whether well-being requires more than efficient self-regulation. The dialogue is most productive when each side remains capable of questioning the assumptions of the other.

5.5 Suffering, Freedom, and Ethical Action

Western clinical approaches usually define suffering in relation to distress, impairment, conflict, avoidance, dysregulation, or maladaptive belief. The Yogavāsiṣṭha locates the root of suffering in avidyā—misunderstanding the nature of self and reality—and in the vāsanās that perpetuate attachment. The scope is therefore broader than symptom reduction. A person may function socially and still remain bound by fear, craving, comparison, and egoic appropriation.

Nevertheless, the text does not require abandonment of ordinary responsibilities. Its ideal of freedom while living suggests action without possessive identification. This point prevents non-duality from being interpreted as passivity. Humanistic psychology's emphasis on congruence and responsible growth (Rogers, 1961), social-cognitive accounts of agency (Bandura, 2001), and acceptance-based therapy's focus on values-guided action (Hayes et al., 1999) provide useful interlocutors. Across these approaches, psychological freedom is expressed not by the absence of action but by a less compulsive relation to internal events.

6. Toward an Integrative Process Model

A careful synthesis can be formulated as a process model rather than a metaphysical merger. The first level is conditioning: past learning and latent tendencies bias attention, appraisal, and expectation. The second level is construction: these biases organise a personal world and a narrative self. The third level



is identification: thoughts and emotions are interpreted as defining the person. The fourth level is reactivity: identification produces avoidance, craving, defensiveness, and repetitive behaviour. The fifth level is reinforcement: repeated behaviour strengthens the original conditioning. This cycle captures vāsanā, cognitive schema, predictive prior, self-model, and behavioural habit without treating them as identical concepts.

Intervention can occur at several points. Cognitive methods examine the accuracy and usefulness of interpretations. Behavioural methods create new learning through action. Humanistic and relational methods loosen defensive self-structures through acceptance. Mindfulness and acceptance-based methods cultivate non-reactive observation. Yogavāsiṣṭha-inspired inquiry adds a more radical question: Who or what is the 'I' that claims ownership of each mental event? Used responsibly, this question can support decentering and existential reflection. It should not replace clinical assessment, trauma-informed care, or evidence-based treatment, and it should not be used to invalidate a person's emotions.

The integrative model also recommends a distinction between content change and context change. Content change modifies what a person thinks—for example, replacing an exaggerated belief with a balanced one. Context change modifies the relation to thinking itself, so that a thought can be present without dictating identity or action. The Yogavāsiṣṭha gives priority to context change through recognition of awareness, while cognitive therapy often begins with content change. Contemporary mindfulness and acceptance-based approaches bridge the two. Psychological practice may be strongest when it can move flexibly between them.

A further contribution concerns the ethics of selfhood. When identity is experienced as fixed and isolated, threat and possession become central. When identity is recognised as relational, constructed, and permeable, compassion may become more psychologically available. Dahl, Lutz, and Davidson (2015) argue that meditation practices can both construct adaptive self-processes and deconstruct rigid self-representation. Thompson (2015) similarly shows that contemplative traditions offer refined first-person analyses without eliminating the need for scientific explanation. The Yogavāsiṣṭha's ideal of engaged freedom can therefore contribute to a psychology that links self-knowledge with responsibility rather than with private escape.

7. Critical Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the Yogavāsiṣṭha is a large, layered literary-philosophical work; no brief article can represent all of its doctrinal tensions, stories, and historical contexts. Second, 'Western psychology' is an umbrella term covering mutually incompatible schools. The comparison therefore selects representative ideas rather than offering an exhaustive history. Third, Sanskrit terms such as citta, saṅkalpa, vāsanā, and ahaṁkāra carry semantic ranges that cannot be captured by one English equivalent. Fourth, neuroimaging and clinical studies of meditation examine specific practices and populations; they cannot validate non-dual metaphysics or guarantee identical outcomes across traditions.

There are also practical risks. Philosophical claims about the unreality of the ego can be misapplied to dismiss trauma, social injustice, grief, or psychiatric illness. For some persons, intensive self-inquiry



may increase confusion or dissociation if undertaken without stability and guidance. A responsible integrative psychology must therefore distinguish liberating decentering from avoidance, emotional numbing, or denial. The Yogavāsisṭha should be engaged as a sophisticated philosophical resource, not converted into a universal clinical protocol.

8. Conclusion

The dialogue between the Yogavāsisṭha and Western psychological thought reveals both genuine convergence and irreducible difference. Both challenge the idea of a transparent, unitary ego. Both recognise that habitual patterns shape perception and behaviour. Both identify the capacity to observe cognition as a condition of freedom. Modern theories of schemas, self-models, embodied cognition, predictive processing, mindfulness, and cognitive defusion provide functional vocabularies that clarify how mental construction and identification may operate.

Yet the Yogavāsisṭha's final claim is more radical than psychological flexibility or adaptive self-regulation. It locates freedom in the recognition that consciousness is not confined to the empirical personality and that the ego's apparent solidity is sustained by repeated mental construction. Western psychology, in contrast, generally remains committed to empirical explanation and practical outcomes within embodied life. These differences should be retained, because they make the dialogue intellectually productive.

The most defensible synthesis is therefore process-based. Human experience is conditioned, constructed, identified with, enacted, and reinforced. Transformation becomes possible when these processes are made visible and when the person develops both the capacity to revise cognition and the freedom not to be defined by cognition. In this sense, the Yogavāsisṭha contributes a profound psychology of de-identification, while Western thought contributes empirical methods, developmental models, clinical safeguards, and testable accounts of cognitive function. Their dialogue can support a more comprehensive understanding of consciousness, cognition, and selfhood—one that honours subjective depth without abandoning conceptual precision or scientific responsibility.

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