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REVIEW ARTICLE

Mind and Mental Modifications (*Chitta and Chitta-vrittis*): A Synthesis of Yogic and Psychological Perspectives of *Chitta-vrittis*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the Yogic notion of *chitta-vrittis*—mental modifications—and synthesises it with the main psychological theories to present a comprehensive understanding of the mind and its dynamic characteristics. Utilising basic literature, such as the Patanjali Yoga Sutras and Samkhya Karika, and bolstered by researchers like Taimni and Eliade, the study elucidates the etymology, characteristics, and role of mental oscillations within Yogic philosophy. It also examines the five types of *chitta-vrittis* that Patanjali discussed and that Vyasa and Desikachar elaborated upon in more detail. This research examines the biological, behavioural, psychoanalytic, humanistic, and cognitive reasons for these mental alterations, connecting ancient wisdom with contemporary psychological perspectives. By integrating insights from Yoga with biological psychology, psychoanalytic theory, behavioural models, and humanistic and cognitive psychology, the study emphasises the present significance of Yoga in comprehending and addressing psychological discomfort. The integrated method offers significant insights into mental health, highlighting the importance of mental discipline, awareness, and transformation. This cross-disciplinary paradigm confirms that Yoga is both a spiritual and psychological method.

KEYWORDS:

• *Chitta-vrittis* • Mental Modifications/fluctuations • Biological • Behavioural • Psychoanalytical • Humanistic and Cognitive Psychology

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INTRODUCTION

The Yogic tradition, particularly as articulated in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, emphasises the mastery of the mind (*chitta*) as the cornerstone of spiritual development and emancipation. *chitta-vrittis*, or mental fluctuations, are a crucial component of this paradigm. The second sutra of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, "*Yogah chitta-vritti-nirodhah*," defines Yoga as the end of mental fluctuations (Patanjali 1.2).[1] In contemporary psychology, mental fluctuations (*chitta-vrittis*), states, and behavioural patterns are regarded as manifestations of intricate mental processes, encompassing sensation, perception, cognition, reasoning, problem-solving (intelligence and creativity), motivation, emotion, and memory. The intersection of traditional Yoga and contemporary psychology provides a robust framework for comprehending the origins and regulation of mental turbulence.

This article connects ancient Indian ideas on the mind (*Chitta*) and its constant change (*chitta-vrittis*) with modern psychological theories. It examines the alignment and divergence of the idea of *chitta-vrittis* with the viewpoints presented by biological, behavioural, psychoanalytic, humanistic, and cognitive schools of psychology. The goal of this comparative analysis is to demonstrate the depth of the psychological teachings of Yoga and how they can aid individuals in understanding stress and mental fluctuations (*chitta-vrittis*), as well as help them maintain mental health.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

This paper aims to:

1. Investigate the Yogic definition of *chitta* and *chitta-vrittis*, along with the various varieties of *chitta-vrittis* as delineated in classical writings.
2. Examine the essence and influence of mental alterations from both yogic and psychological perspectives.
3. Investigate the origins of *chitta-vrittis* through the framework of five principal psychological theories and Yogic perspectives.
4. Demonstrate how Yogic philosophy and modern psychology can complement and support each other.
5. Offer insights into potential integrative strategies for managing stress and promoting mental health.

The origins of the words "*Chitta*" (mind) and "*Chitta-vrittis*" (mental fluctuations)

The Sanskrit word "***chitta***" originates from the root "***chit***," which translates to "mind," "consciousness," "awareness," or "perception." In the Yoga tradition, "***chitta***" refers to the whole mind or consciousness. Vyasa's commentary states that ***chitta*** is composed of manas (the mind that processes sensory information), buddhi (the intellect or ability to make decisions), and ahamkara (the sense of self) (Vyasa, Commentary on Yoga Sutra 1.1).[2] In terms of modern psychology, therefore *chitta* includes its levels (conscious, subconscious, and unconscious), its states (wakefulness, sleep, dream, dreamless sleep, meditation, etc.), and its mental processes (sensation, perception, cognition, thinking, problem-solving, motivation, emotion, and memory).

The word ***"vritti"*** comes from the Sanskrit word ***"vrit,"*** which means "to whirl" or "to revolve or "modifications" or "fluctuations" or "changes" or "alterations" So, ***chitta-vrittis*** means:

1. The mind/consciousness and its contents are dynamic and always changing.
2. According to Vyasa's commentary on the first Yoga Sutra,[1.1] ***chitta-vrittis*** refer to the changes or fluctuations occurring in manas (desires or will, kalpana imagination, planning, etc.), smriti (memory of past experiences), buddhi (decision-making, logical thinking, creative and innovative thought), and ahamkara (the sense of 'I' as the doer of action or as a son, daughter, mother, father, etc.).
3. Changes in how the mind works, such as how it senses, perceives, thinks, solves problems, remembers, feels, and is motivated.
4. Changes and shifts between different levels of mind/consciousness, such as conscious, subconscious, unconscious, and super-conscious.
5. Changes in states of consciousness, attention, sleep (REM), deep sleep (N-REM), dreaming, meditation, and so on.

These mental oscillations (*chitta-vrittis*) are analogous to waves on a lake's surface that obscure the water's clarity, symbolising the mind's deviation from tranquillity (Desikachar, 1999).[2]

Nature of *Chitta-vrittis* in Yogic texts

The Yoga Sutras state that the mind (*chitta*) is constantly in flux and lacks stability. This restlessness is not intrinsically abnormal; instead, it signifies the natural dynamics of the mental field. However, these changes (*chitta-vrittis*) can obscure the true essence of the Self (*purusha*), which is pure consciousness that remains unchanged. The mind transforms into a screen that displays external inputs and internal patterns. The goal of Yoga is to make this screen see-through so that the light of the Self (*purusha*) can shine through. This will help the practitioner to understand their actual self.

Consequently, *chitta-vrittis* possess a dual nature; they may be classified as *klishta* (afflictive) or *aklishta* (non-afflictive), contingent upon their relation to the *kleshas*—ignorance (*avidya*), egoism (*asmita*), attachment (*raga*), aversion (*dvesha*), and clinging to life (*abhinivesha*) (Patanjali Yoga *Sutra* 2.3).[1] These mental ailments alter the *chitta* (sensation, perception, thinking, memory, problem-solving, emotions, motivation, etc.) and aggravate *vrittis*, resulting in misery and confusion (distress). The Yoga Sutras outline a sophisticated psychology of the mind and mental processes, similar to contemporary therapeutic methodologies that distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive thinking. The *Samkhya Karika*, a seminal classic in Indian philosophy, elucidates the philosophical framework for this perspective by detailing the manifestation of *prakriti* (macro-cosmos and micro-cosmos, i.e. living being/human being) through the interplay of the three qualities (*gunas*)—*sattva*, *rajas*, and tamas—leading to mental disturbances (*vrittis*) (Larson 95).[3] The *Bhagavad Gita* further supports this idea by discussing how these three qualities (*gunas*) influence the mind. For instance, *rajas guna* (*quality*) causes restlessness, tamas causes inactivity, and sattva causes clarity. Each of these is linked to a particular sort of *vritti* (*Gita* 14.5–9). Grasping these classifications facilitates a psychological assessment of mental disorders in both philosophical and therapeutic contexts.

Swami Satchidananda asserts that *chitta-vrittis* are not only distractions; they signify the mind's incessant engagement in comprehending and responding to reality (*Satchidananda* 11).[1] Every *vritti* (mental alteration) is a temporary impression or groove that leaves a mark (*samskara*) in the mind-field. When not controlled, these *vrittis* accumulate, altering how people perceive things and keeping them trapped in cycles of desire, fear, and misidentification.

Taimni elucidates that *chitta-vrittis* are not solely ideas but include all psychological and emotional activities that disrupt the mind's tranquillity (Taimni 18).[4] Mircea Eliade explains that these changes in the mind (*chitta*) can be both helpful and harmful. They hide pure consciousness, but learning how to control them can lead to spiritual awakening (Eliade 91).[5] *Chitta-vrittis* are not intrinsically harmful; they become problematic when they are uncontrolled. They are the frameworks through which individuals see, interpret, and respond to reality. *Nirodha*, or the end of their existence, does not mean repression. Instead, it means going beyond, where the seer is in their own real nature (*svarupa*).

Different kinds of *Chitta-vrittis*

Patanjali divides *chitta-vrittis* into five groups: *pramana* (correct knowledge), *viparyaya* (wrong knowledge), *vikalpa* (imagination), nidra (sleep), and *smriti* (memory) (Patanjali 1.6).[1] Vyasa, in his ancient commentary, elucidates that these can be classified as either *klishta* (afflicted) or *aklishta* (non-afflicted), depending on their capacity to generate suffering (distress) or release (Vyasa, Yoga-Bhashya).

1. ***Pramana:*** Pramana refers to correct knowledge that originates from three sources: direct perception (*pratyaksha*), inference (*anumana*), and dependable testimony (*agama*).
2. ***Viparyaya:*** *Viparyaya* is equivalent to illusion or cognitive distortion, denoting a misunderstanding or misconception.
3. ***Vikalpa:*** *Vikalpa* is thinking about or imagining things based on words, which often do not have any facts to back them up.
4. ***Nidra:*** *Nidra* is a state of sleep, where consciousness is temporarily interrupted, yet mental changes continue subtly.

5. ***Smriti:*** Smriti is memory, the ability to remember things that have happened in the past and how they affect how we think now.

There are psychological analogies for each of these *vrittis*. For instance, *viparyaya* is similar to faulty schemas in cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), and *smriti* is comparable to memory traces stored in the subconscious and unconscious mind. Even *nidra* (sleep, including REM-Rapid Eye Movement and N-REM-Non-Rapid Eye Movement) is acknowledged as a *chitta-vritti*, as it signifies a latent state of thought rather than an in terruption of action. This classification supports the notion that all states of consciousness—waking, dreaming, and sleeping—are influenced by cognitive alterations.

Desikachar asserts on the previous classification, emphasising that the same sort of *vritti* can either facilitate or obstruct spiritual advancement, contingent upon the practitioner's mindfulness, practice and detachment (Desikachar 23).[2]

METHODOLOGY – RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The research design is qualitative and interpretative, utilising comparative textual analysis. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, along with traditional commentary by Vyasa and Swami Satchidananda, are primary texts. Secondary sources include Kalat, Weiten, Neisser, Maslow, and Freud's scholarly interpretations of Yoga philosophy and basic literature in modern psychology. The methodology employs hermeneutic comparison, interpreting essential Yogic notions through the lens of contemporary psychological theories while maintaining their distinctiveness. The objective is synthesis, not assimilation.

Yogic View on What Causes Chitta-Vrittis

The Yogic tradition elucidates the fundamental origins of *chitta-vrittis*. Patanjali delineates the affliction (*kleshas*)—ignorance (*avidya*), egoism (*asmita*), attachment (raga), aversion (*dvesha*), and fear of death (abhinivesha)—as the primary afflictions that engender disturbed mind (*chitta-vrittis*) and mental states (Patanjali 2.30[1]). These psychological impurities distort perception, incite emotional turbulence, and sustain mental fluctuations (*vrittis*) that obscure the inner seer. Patanjali posits that the transcendence of affliction (*kleshas*) is achievable through disciplined practice (*abhyasa*) and detachment (*vairagya*), or through Kriya Yoga, which encompasses austerity (*tapas*), self-study (*svadhyaya*), and surrender to the divine (*ishvarapranidhana*), or Ashtanga Yoga, ultimately resulting in nirodha—the cessation of mental fluctuations.

The Samkhya Karika ascribes *vrittis* to the interaction of the three gunas: *rajas* (activity), *tamas* (inertia), and *sattva* (clarity). *Rajas* create desire, restlessness, and ambition; *Tamas* causes delusion, lethargy, and ignorance; and *Sattva* offers clarity and equilibrium. Mental alterations manifest these features in varied degrees of prominence. The changes in *chitta* reveal the current balance—or lack thereof—among the *gunas*, and self-transformation entails moving towards *Sattvic* supremacy (Larson 102).[3]

The Upanishads characterise the mind as intrinsically brilliant yet veiled by wants and sensory perceptions. For example, the Katha Upanishad uses the metaphor of a chariot, with the senses as horses, the mind as the reins, and the intellect as the charioteer. When the mind (reins) is not trained, the senses go wild, which makes the mind feel bad. This metaphor illustrates how mental tendencies (*vrittis*) can become uncontrolled when attention and desires are not properly directed. (Katha Upanishad, S. Radhakrishnan, HarperCollins, 1994).[6]

The Yoga Vashistha explains that the mind creates the world and that pain comes from the way we think. This literature says that *vasanas* (deep-seated impressions) from past events make mental alterations (*vrittis*), which are thinking patterns and emotional responses that happen over and over again. When these impressions are examined through self-awareness and detachment, freedom emerges. Therefore, the reasons for *chitta-vrittis* are not something external to ourselves, but rather inner habits and conditioning that we have developed over many lifetimes. (Yoga Vashistha, translated by Swami Venkatesananda in 1993).[7]

To sum up, Yogic treatises suggest that *chitta-vrittis* originate from ignorance, ego, and latent impressions (*samskaras and vasanas*) formed by desire and attachment. These works advocate a systematic approach—via ethical

conduct, self-discipline, meditation, and wisdom—to cleanse and tranquillise the mind (*Chitta*). In contrast to psychological approaches that frequently address symptoms, Yoga presents a soteriological framework focused on comprehensive inner transformation.

Biological and Psychological Explanations for the Causes of Chitta-vrittis

Biological psychology focuses on how genetics, the brain, neurotransmitters, endocrine glands, and hormones affect human behaviour and mental processes. From this perspective, *chitta-vrittis* emerge from hereditary characteristics, gene dominance vs recessivity, brain activity, and changes in neurotransmitters and hormones. Prakash (2012, pp. 22-24)[8] asserts that the transmission of XX chromosomes designates the gender as female, whereas the transmission of XY chromosomes indicates male. There are many differences in how men and women think. The presence of three twenty-first chromosomes leads to mental retardation known as Down syndrome or Mongolism. Conversely, the presence of only 45 chromosomes, with the absence of an X chromosome (the sex chromosome), results in an XO female, characterised by delayed sexual development, short stature, and a webbed neck, a condition referred to as Turner syndrome. Klinefelter's syndrome, which is marked by small breasts in females and small testes with an absence of sperm production in males, results from the presence of "XXY—two chromosomes instead of the normal one." The existence of an additional Y chromosome in the twenty-third pair increases the likelihood of males exhibiting animalistic traits. Individuals with the XYY chromosomal set are often characterised as impulsive, aggressive, and disruptive. Genetic predispositions to diseases such as depression or anxiety indicate a biological foundation for the severity and recurrence of specific *vrittis*. Hey. Kalat emphasises how neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine can alter mood, attention, and thought processes, which may manifest as changes in mental state (Kalat, 2015, p. 118).[9] Kalat also notes that the limbic system, particularly the amygdala and hippocampus, plays a crucial role in regulating emotions, forming memories, and coping with stress (Kalat, 2015, p. 45).[9] Disruptions in this area might cause emotional *vrittis* to become stronger, including fear, rage, or worry.

Prakash (2012, pp. 36-37) states that the activity of the endocrine organs, specifically the release of hormones, is influenced by factors such as the chemical composition of the blood, the state of the nervous system, fatigue, and the organism's emotional state. The pituitary gland, often referred to as the master gland, secretes nine distinct hormones. Some of them are responsible for controlling the hormones of other glands, such as the thyroid gland and the gonads. He (Prakash, 2012, p. 39) observes that "Individuals with depression frequently exhibit hormonal imbalances, particularly in those regulated by the pituitary gland, which is governed by the brain. Fluctuations in emotional states can influence the pituitary, subsequently impacting other glands and ultimately behaviour."

Contemporary cognitive neuroscience correlates mental problems with hyperactivity in the Default Mode Network (DMN), which is associated with self-referential thoughts and mind-wandering (*chitta-vrittis*). This corresponds with the Yogic concept of a mind ensnared in *viparyaya* and *vikalpa*. Rosenzweig asserts that neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine affect mood and cognition; imbalances may induce obsessive thoughts or depressive states—contemporary equivalents to excessive or maladaptive vrittis (Rosenzweig 112).[10]

Research in psychophysiology demonstrates that stress-induced activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis disrupts mental homeostasis, aligning with Patanjali's perspective that *klishta vrittis* are a fundamental source of suffering (distress).

Behavioural Psychological Analysis on the Origins of Chitta-Vrittis

Behavioural psychology elucidates overt behaviour (visible actions) and covert behaviour (unobservable mental processes) as acquired responses and/or cognitive habits to environmental inputs. From this perspective, conditioning and reinforcement shape *chitta-vrittis*, which are mental fluctuations. For example, obsessive thoughts or conditioned phobias are types of recurrent *vrittis* that Yoga tries to get rid of. Skinner's operant conditioning theory posits that behaviours repeated over time become habitual—essentially hardened vrittis.[11] If an individual receives affirmation for nervous or violent behaviour, such responses are likely to endure and resurface

in analogous circumstances (Feist *et al.* 87)[12] Miltenberger underscores the significance of antecedents and consequences in perpetuating maladaptive behaviours.[13] These conditioned responses might be perceived as patterns of vrittis that, if not actively changed, persist in dominating the mind. Weiten similarly contends that phobias, compulsions, and emotional triggers are frequently acquired behaviours that can be unlearned via desensitisation or cognitive-behavioural training (Weiten 72).[14]

Psychoanalytical Psychological Perspective on the Origins of Chitta-Vrittis

Freud's concept of the mind, which includes the id, ego, and superego, is a great way to understand *chitta-vrittis*. The id, propelled by fundamental impulses, aligns with the *Samkhya Philosophy* and the *Bhagavad-Gita's* notions of tamasic and *rajasic vrittis*, including desires, restlessness, ambitions, illusion, delusion, ignorance, lethargy, languor, passionate attachments, an inflated ego, greed, lust, or rage. The superego, which represents the moral and social norms that people have internalised, can cause people to feel guilty or conceal their feelings, leading to neurotic behaviours. The ego, in its effort to reconcile the two, frequently cultivates defence mechanisms such as denial, repression, or projection, analogous to distorted vrittis (Freud 42, 1962).[15]

Freud claimed that unresolved unconscious tensions result in mental diseases. In Yogic terminology, these are comparable to latent impressions (*samskaras*) or past experiences (*vasanas*) that reemerge as *vrittis*, affecting present behaviour. Freud's theory of the "repetition compulsion" is similar to the Yogic belief that unprocessed *samskaras* and *vasanas* keep disturbing mental quiet. The goal of Yoga is to purify the *chitta*, which is similar to the goal of psychoanalysis, which is to bring the unconscious to light so that it can be resolved.

The Humanistic Psychological Perspective on the Causes of Chitta-Vrittis

Humanistic psychology, as exemplified by Maslow and Rogers, focuses on self-actualisation and the realisation of inner potential. From this perspective, psychological anguish (*klishta vrittis*) arises not from disease but from unfulfilled wants and existential incongruence. Maslow's hierarchy of requirements posits that unfulfilled physiological and psychological demands result in anxiety, conflict, neurosis, or compulsive thinking and emotional activity—contemporary parallels to *klishta vrittis* (distress).[16] The Journal of Humanistic Psychology emphasises that internal conflict and repressed creativity result in enduring negative thought patterns, fundamentally akin to *klishta vrittis* (distress).

Yoga also perceives suffering as stemming from identification with the fluctuating contents of the mind (*chitta-vrittis*). The *nirodha* of v*rittis* is not repression but transcendence via comprehension. Humanistic therapies promote awareness, genuineness, and mindfulness—attributes fundamental to Yogic practices. Rogers' concept of the "fully functioning person" parallels the *sthita-prajna* of Yoga (*Bhagavad-Gita*)—a state in which the mind stays undisturbed by outward chaos. The journey to self-realisation (*purusha*) in Yoga parallels Maslow's concept of self-actualisation.

Humanistic psychology posits that mental disturbances (*klishta vrittis*) arise from incongruities between the actual self and the ideal self. Carl Rogers stressed the significance of congruence—harmony between internal experiences and external actions. Incongruence, frequently induced by conditional positive regard, engenders psychological tension and a fragmented identity, which presents as vrittis such as worry, humiliation, or self-doubt (Rogers 155).[17]

Cognitive Psychological Viewpoint on the Origins of Chitta-vrittis

Cognitive psychology examines how the mind functions, encompassing aspects such as memory, attention, language, and reasoning. From this perspective, *chitta-vrittis* are ways of thinking, interpreting, and forming beliefs, as well as having a belief system. Cognitive psychology asserts that thoughts affect emotions and behaviours. Aaron Beck's cognitive theory posits that negative habitual thoughts and dysfunctional beliefs engender distorted cognitive processes, analogous to Patanjali's *klishta* and/or *viparyaya vrittis* (Beck 34).[18] These cognitive distortions, such as catastrophising, overgeneralisation, or dichotomous thinking, correspond to *viparyaya* (false knowledge) and *vikalpa* (imagination) within Patanjali's theory. Neisser's notion of the self as a "cognitive schema" corresponds with Yoga's

understanding that ego-centric identification (ahamkara) leads to enduring mental unrest.[19]

According to Ellis's REBT theory, irrational ideas such as "I must be perfect" or "Everyone must love me" are what cause emotional pain (Ellis 105).[20] These illogical schemas produce vrittis of worry, dread, or fury.

CONCLUSION

The concept of *chitta-vrittis* in Yoga offers a profound and nuanced understanding of how the mind operates, which is remarkably similar to the insights provided by contemporary psychology. Both systems, despite their distinct cultural and philosophical origins, concur that the mind serves as a catalyst, constituting the origin of suffering (distress) and the pathway to liberation (self-actualisation). Yoga emphasises firsthand experience and meditative self-reflection, whereas psychology focuses on observation and therapeutic intervention. When combined, these viewpoints can shed light on the complex nature of the human mind.

This examination of chitta-vrittis through Yogic philosophy and contemporary psychological ideas illustrates the enduring significance of the mind, mental fluctuations, and mind-management. Yoga offers a spiritual way to get over mental problems, whereas psychology gives us fundamental tools to figure out where they come from. Combining both points of view leads to a more complete view of mental health, where old wisdom and scientific rigour work together. This model could help improve therapy and provide a better understanding of how the mind works.

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