



## UNDERSTANDING STRESS FROM AN ANCIENT PERSPECTIVE: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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### Abstract:

With World Health Organization highlighting the paramount attention needed in this 21<sup>st</sup> century to improve mental health conditions across globe, most developed countries are taking a serious look at methods of improving ‘mental-health’ of their people so as to reduce the effects of stress emanating from modern lifestyle. (WHO, 2023) Ancient Indian literature including Upanishads and Bhagavad-Gita explained long ago, the significance of ‘health’ in general and ‘mental-health’ in specific. As per ancient Indian texts, Mind (Manas) is the instrument for thinking, feeling and perceiving (Subhash Sharma, 2007). Ancient Indian texts help to understand the causes behind disturbances occurring to mind (reasons causing stress situations) as well as effects of these disturbances on body/psyche (consequences of ill health at physical level and mental level). Ancient Indian Literature suggests ways and methods to mankind on how to maintain & improve “mental - health” by bringing mind into “equilibrium state”. In this review work the effort has been made to explore the ancient understandings of stress and its management.

**Keywords:** Stress, Mental health, Mind, Ancient scriptures.

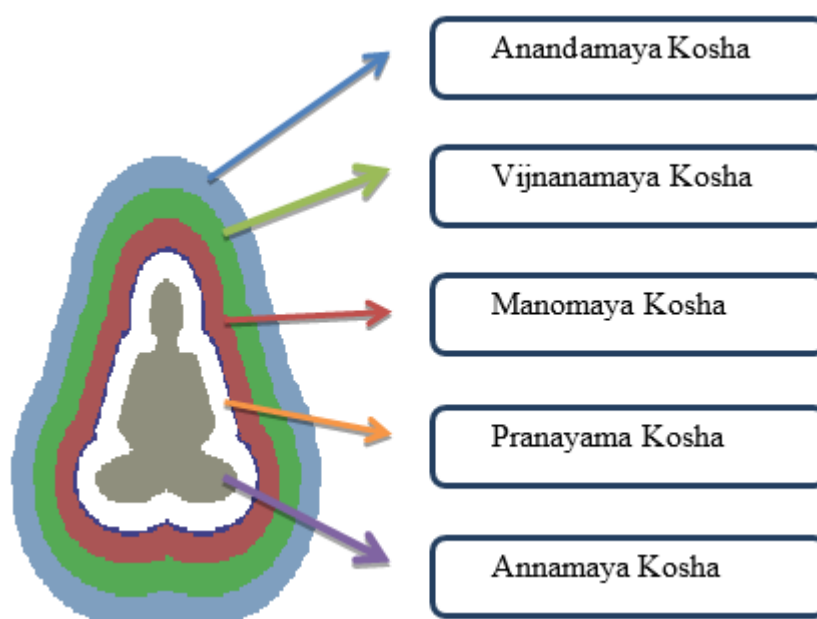
### Introduction:

Stress, a ubiquitous phenomenon in modern society, has been a subject of contemplation and exploration since ancient times. Maintenance of life is critically dependent on keeping our internal milieu constant in the face of a changing environment. Cannon (1929) called this “homeostasis.” Selye (1956) used the term “stress” to represent the effects of anything that seriously threatens homeostasis. While the term “stress” may be a relatively recent addition to our vocabulary, ancient scriptures and philosophical texts provide profound insights into the human experience of pressure, challenges, and the quest for inner harmony. In ancient civilizations, sages, philosophers, and spiritual leaders sought to understand the nature of stress and its impact on the human mind and body. These timeless texts, spanning diverse cultures such as Hinduism offer a rich tapestry of wisdom that delves into the intricacies of managing stress in various facets of life. This exploration often goes beyond

the mere physical manifestations of stress, delving into the realms of emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being. Ancient scriptures provide a holistic approach to understanding stress, acknowledging the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit. The teachings encapsulate not only the challenges posed by external circumstances but also the internal battles within the human psyche. In this review through ancient wisdom, we will unravel the profound insights and time-tested techniques prescribed by these scriptures to navigate the complex terrain of stress. From mindfulness practices to philosophical perspectives on detachment, the ancient texts offer a treasure trove of guidance for individuals seeking solace and equilibrium in the face of life's inevitable trials.

### Holistic concept of the human existence

According to Taittiriya upanishad, each person is made up of five dimensions, namely Annamaya kosha, Pranamaya kosha, Manomaya kosha, Vignanamaya kosha and Anand maya kosha. As per western philosophy, the whole life force is created on matter-based paradigm, however as per ancient Indian Upanishads, the life force is created on consciousness based paradigm (H R Nagendra ,2003).



**Figure1:-** Panchkosha Model based on Taitiriya Upanishad

#### **Annamaya Kosha (Physical Sheath):**

The outermost layer, Annamaya Kosha, pertains to the physical body. Stress often manifests physically, leading to muscle tension, fatigue, and various health issues. Exploring stress in the context of Annamaya Kosha involves recognizing the intricate connection between the external stressors and their physical ramifications.

#### **Pranamaya Kosha (Vital Energy Sheath):**

Beyond the physical, stress influences the Pranamaya Kosha, the sheath associated with vital energy or life force. Disruptions in breath, increased heart rate, and heightened physiological responses are indicative of stress impacting this dimension. Techniques such as breath control and pranayama from yogic traditions offer avenues for managing stress at this level.

#### **Manomaya Kosha (Mental Sheath):**

Stress significantly affects the Manomaya Kosha, which encompasses the mental and emotional realms. Racing thoughts, anxiety, and emotional turmoil are expressions of stress in this dimension. Ancient practices like mindfulness and meditation aim to bring about a sense of calm and balance to the Manomaya Kosha, fostering mental resilience.

### **Vijnanamaya Kosha (Intellectual Sheath):**

Stress can infiltrate the realm of intellect and wisdom, influencing decision-making and cognitive processes. The Vijnanamaya Kosha involves higher mental functions, and ancient teachings emphasize cultivating discernment and wisdom to navigate stressful situations with clarity.

### **Anandamaya Kosha (Bliss Sheath):**

At the core of the self lies the Anandamaya Kosha, representing a state of bliss and interconnectedness. While stress may seem antithetical to bliss, ancient scriptures suggest that understanding stress in the context of this sheath involves recognizing it as a temporary state and tapping into the enduring sense of inner joy through practices like self-realization and spiritual inquiry. In exploring stress through the framework of Panchakosha, one gains a holistic understanding that goes beyond the surface manifestations. The ancient wisdom embedded in this concept offers a roadmap for addressing stress at multiple levels, fostering not only physical well-being but also mental clarity, emotional balance, and a deeper connection to the inner self. Human focus generally stays initially in the lower level of consciousness and after understanding effects of focus on lower level bodies, it tends to shift to higher level bodies. A person with viveka generally tends to shift their consciousness to higher level bodies sooner than others. Viveka is the discriminating ability of the person to know what is real and what is temporary (Subhash Sharma, 2007). Every layer of body has impact on other layer. They are very connected layers of the same consciousness at different levels. It is also to be noted that higher level sheath has more impact on lower level sheath when compared to the impact of lower level sheath on the higher ones. This could be understood like this, “an injury while playing though is at physical layer of the body (Annamaya kosha) it also has impact on the higher layers of the body for example at Mental body level (Manomaya kosha). Similarly “an unrest” at mental body level (Manomaya kosha) has impact on physical layer of the body (Annamaya kosha) as well.

### **Stress as per Yoga Philosophy**

According to Yoga Philosophy, Stress means imbalance (HR Nagendra, 2003). At the mental and physical level, excessive speed and demanding situations cause pain, leading to disease and ailments. Multiple thoughts at the same time in mental plane cause the imbalance, giving no room to think about rationality of thoughts. According to HR Nagendra (2003), imbalances at the mental level manifest as upsurges in emotions, and cause strong likes and dislikes. There is invisible connection between all five layers of the body. Imbalance in any layer of the sheath (barring ‘Anandmaya Kosha’ as it is place of ‘perfect place of balance’) has cascading effect on the other sheaths of the body. However imbalance in the higher level layer like ‘Vignanamaya kosha’ causes more imbalance in lower level layers like ‘Manomaya Kosha’, ‘Pranamaya Kosha’, and ‘Annamaya Kosha’. Imbalances in lower level layers like ‘Annamaya Kosha’ causes relatively less imbalance in higher level layers like ‘Pranamaya Kosha’, ‘Manomaya Kosha’ and ‘Vignanamaya Kosha’. Avidya (Ignorance) causes imbalance in the ‘Vignanamaya Kosha’. Ignorance hinders everybody to be able to distinguish between what is real and what is unreal. Ignorance stops everybody to be able to differentiate between what is permanent and what is temporary. Strong emotions like Raaga, Dwesha, Moha, Mada, Maathsarya, Kaama, Krodha etc. cause imbalances in the Manomaya kosha. Imbalances in ‘Manomaya Kosha’ would cause disturbances and imbalances in ‘prana flow’ (life force) at Pranamaya Kosha level. Imbalances in ‘Pranamaya kosha’ bring imbalance in the physical body. These imbalances in ‘Pranamaya Kosha’, would settle down as visible ailments in ‘Annamaya Kosha’. According to HR Nagendra (2003), these settled imbalances in ‘Annamaya Kosha’ effect one (or) all of following

- An overused tissue/organ/system
- Genetically defective tissue/organ/system
- Already weak organ/tissue/system due to external factors.

For example, systems like digestive system, circulatory system, reproductive system etc. would be affected. For example, organs like heart, liver would be affected. If a person, unfortunately gets

effected due to external factors like accident/ bacteria, then before body immune system completely can cure the illness, this ‘tops-down’ passed imbalance to the ‘Annamaya Kosha’, aggravates the existing illness. Imbalances in ‘Manomaya Kosha’ also may settle down as diseases and they are ‘non- communicable’ in nature like ‘Diabetes, Hyper Tension, cardio vascular diseases’ etc.

**Table 1:-** Imbalance causes at each Human sheath

Layer of the body	Imbalance causes
Blissful Layer of Consciousness	No imbalance. Perfect balancing point for body, mind
Wisdom Layer of Consciousness	Ignorance. ( in ability to differentiate between real and temporary)
Astral Layer of Consciousness	Strong likes and Dislikes
Vital Layer of Consciousness	Imbalances in breath flow
Physical Layer of Consciousness	Un healthy tissue/organ/system at the physical body level.

### Methods to control modifications of the Mind

According to *Swami Vivekananda*, Yoga can help to control the modifications of the mind.

*Yogashchittavrittinirodhah*| Patanjali Yoga Sutra| 1|2||

“Yoga is restraining the mind-stuff (Chitta) from taking various forms (Vrttis)” We have to understand what *Chitta* is, and what are these *Vrttis*. For example, I have this eye. Eyes do not see. Take away the brain centre which is in the head, the eyes will still be there, the retina complete, and also the picture, and yet the eyes will not see. So, the eyes are only a secondary instrument, not the organ of vision. The organ of vision is in the nerve centre of the brain. The two eyes will not be sufficient alone. Sometimes a man is asleep with his eyes open. The light is there and the picture is there, but a third thing is necessary; mind must be joined to the organ. The eye is the external instrument. We need also the brain centre and the agency of the mind. Carriages roll down a street and you do not hear them. Why? Because your mind has not attached itself to the organ of hearing. First there is the instrument, then there is the organ, and third, the mind attachment to these two. The mind takes the impression farther in, and presents it to the determinative faculty *Buddhi* which reacts. Along with this reaction flashes the idea of egoism. Then this mixture of action and reaction is presented to the *Purusa*, the real Soul, who perceives an object in this mixture. The organs (*Indriyas*), together with the mind (*Manas*), the determinative faculty (*Buddhi*) and egoism (*Ahamkara*), form the group called the *Antahkarana* (the internal instrument).

They are but various processes in the mind-stuff, called *Chitta*. The waves of thought in the *Chitta* are called *Vrtti* (“the whirlpool” is the literal translation). What is thought? Thought is a force, as is gravitation or repulsion. It is absorbed from the infinite storehouse of force in nature; the instrument called *Chitta* takes hold of that force, and, when it passes out at the other end it is called thought. This force is supplied to us through food, and out of that food the body obtains the power of motion, etc. Others, the finer forces, it throws out in what we call thought. Naturally we see that the mind is not intelligent; yet it appears to be intelligent. Why? Because the intelligent soul is behind it. You are the only sentient being; mind is only the instrument through which you catch the external world. Take this book; as a book it does not exist outside, what exists outside is unknown and unknowable. It is the suggestion that gives a blow to the mind, and the mind gives out the reaction. If a stone is thrown into the water the water is thrown against it in the form of waves. The real universe is the occasion of the reaction of the mind. A book form, or an elephant form, or a man form, is not outside; all that we know is our mental reaction from the outer suggestion. Matter is the “permanent possibility of sensation,” said John Stuart Mill. It is only the suggestion that is outside. Take an oyster for example. You know how pearls are made. A grain of sand or something gets inside and begins to irritate it, and the oyster throws a sort of enamelling around the sand, and this makes the pearl. This whole universe is our own enamel, so to say, and the real universe is the grain of sand. The ordinary man will never understand it, because, when he tries to, he throws out an enamel, and sees only his own enamel. Now we understand what is meant by these *Vrttis*. The real man is behind the mind, and the mind is the instrument in his hands, and it is his intelligence that is percolating through it. It is only when you stand behind it that it becomes intelligent. When man gives it up it falls to pieces, and is nothing. So, you understand what is meant by *Chitta*. It is the mind-stuff, and *Vrttis* are the waves and ripples

rising in it when external causes impinge on it. These *Vrttis* are our whole universe. The bottom of the lake we cannot see, because its surface is covered with ripples. It is only possible when the rippled have subsided, and the water is calm, for us to catch a glimpse of the bottom. If the water is muddy, the bottom will not be seen; if the water is agitated all the time, the bottom will not be seen. If the water is clear, and there are no waves, we shall see the bottom. That bottom of the lake is our own true Self; the lake is the *Chitta*, and the waves are the *Vrttis*. Again, this mind is in three states; one is darkness, which is called *Tamas*, just as in brutes and idiots; it only acts to injure others. No other idea comes into that state of mind. Then there is the active state of mind, *Rajas*, whose chief motives are power and enjoyment. "I will be powerful and rule others." Then, at last, when the waves cease, and the water of the lake becomes clear, there is the state called *Sattva*, serenity, calmness. It is not inactive, but rather intensely active. It is the greatest manifestation of power to be calm. It is easy to be active. Let the reins go, and the horses will drag you down. Anyone can do that, but he who can stop the plunging horses is the strong man. Which requires the greater strength, letting go, or restraining? The calm man is not the man who is dull. You must not mistake *Sattva* for dullness, or laziness. The calm man is the one who has restraint of these waves. Activity is the manifestation of the lower strength, calmness of the superior strength. This *Chitta* is always trying to get back to its natural pure state, but the organs draw it out. To restrain it, and to check this outward tendency, and to start it on the return journey to that essence of intelligence is the first step in *Yoga*, because only in this way can the *Chitta* get into its proper course.

Although this *Chitta* is in every animal, from the lowest to the highest, it is only in the human form that we find intellect, and until the mind-stuff can take the form of intellect it is not possible for it to return through all these steps, and liberate the soul. Immediate salvation is impossible for the cow and the dog, although they have mind, because their *Chitta* cannot as yet take that form which we call intellect. *Chitta* manifests itself in all these different forms - scattering, darkening, weakening, and concentrating. These are the four states in which the mind-stuff manifests itself. First a scattered form, is activity. Its tendency is to manifest in the form of pleasure or of pain. Then the dull form is darkness, the only tendency of which is to injure others. The commentator says the first form is natural to the *Devas*, the angels, and the second is the demoniacal form. The *Ekagra*, the concentrated form of the *Chitta*, is what brings us to *Samadhi*" Just to brief out the interpretation done by **Swami Vivekananda**, mind plays an important role in perceiving things of the external world. For example, eyes of the body form an instrument while the organ to sense vision is in the brain centre. Mind attaches the instrument to the organ and creates the picture of the "external object". Mind also presents this picture to discriminative faculty called "Buddhi". If the Mind gives distorted picture of "external object", Buddhi would not be able to work as expected as its input is distorted. So any modifications of the mind while attaching instrument to organ can potentially lead to distorted image of external object and there by becomes the reason for reactions that would occur as response. This is something like perceiving "rope" as "snake". Even though eyes and brain centre is working healthy, due to current state of the mind at the time of perceiving, wrong object could be perceived. Gunas which were described earlier, would cause modifications to the state of mind.

Due to continuous modifications of the mind, mind can exist in any one of the four forms namely - scattering, darkening, weakening, and concentrating. Concentrating form of the mind can give correct picture of the "external object" so that buddhi can work without error. Yoga is a method which helps to come to concentrated form of the mind there by restraining mind to take other forms.

Abhyasavairagyabhyas tannirodhah|| Patanjali Yoga Sutra| 1|12||

"Their control is by practice and non-attachment." "The mind, to have this non-attachment, must be clear, good and rational. Why should we practice? Because each action is like the pulsations quivering over the surface of the lake. The vibration dies out, and what is left? The *Samsharas*, the impressions. When a large number of these impressions is left on the mind they coalesce, and become a habit. It is said "habit is second nature;" it is first nature also, and the whole nature of man; everything that we are, is the result of habit. "

As per above interpretation by **Swami Vivekananda**, modifications of the mind can be restrained by practice and non- attachment. Previous impressions left on the mind play a huge role in generating "

modifications of the mind”. This impression left on the mind has to be purified by practice and non attachment. Like a crystal clear lake, mind has to pass the information to Buddhi, so that the true nature of the person (i.e blissfulness) can come out.

when the true nature of the person (Blissfulness) come out, then it

- Clears Vignanamaya kosha from Ignorance
- Clears Manomaya kosha from strong emotions
- Clears Prana flow imbalances in Pranamaya kosha
- Clears Physical imbalance in Annamaya kosha

### **Practice Suggested to reach Equilibrium state of Mind**

Mandukya Upanishad is the shortest of all Upanishads and is assigned to Atharveda. It is listed as number 6 in the Muktika canon of Upanishads. It discusses the syllable AUM, presents the theory of four states of consciousness, asserts the existence and nature of Soul/Self (Atma). Here we discuss about the four states of Consciousness as described in Mandukya Upanishad as described by (Nikhilananda, 2006).

### **Four states of consciousness:-**

As human being, we generally experience three states of consciousness, namely Jagruta, Swapna, Sushupthi, We rarely experience the fourth state i.e Turiya.

**The waker state of consciousness called Jagruta:-** The waker state of consciousness is turned outward. In this state, Self is shining through the senses, mind, intellect, illumining their respective objects. This consciousness works at the gross body level.

**The dreamer state of Consciousness called Svapna :-** In the dream state, The Self illumines only subtle objects, a replay of the *deep impressions(vasanas)* gathered in the waking state expressing in pictorial form. In the waking state these *vasanas* express as the waker’s thoughts and feelings. Like the waker, the dreamer believes him or her and his or her world is real. The dreamer is equipped with the same instruments for experience as the waker: dream senses to consume dream objects, a dream mind to emote and feel a dream intellect to think dream thoughts, and a dream ego to go about the business of experiencing the dream life. This consciousness works at the subtle body level.

**The deep Sleep state of consciousness called Sushupti:-** In the other States, consciousness flows outward and inward but in sleep it loses direction. The sleeper ego is extremely subtle, its presence indicated by the fact that we experience limitlessness and bliss. In the waking and dream states bliss is sporadic because it is broken by many divisions of thought and feeling. We know of the sleeper’s experience because it reports a good sleep after transforming into a waker. Were the waker actually a different ego from the sleeper, or the dreamer, it wouldn’t recall the experience of sleep or dream. This consciousness works at the casual body level.

**Pure consciousness state called Turiya:-** It is the background that underlies and transcends the three common states of consciousness. It is the true state of experience of the infinite (*ananta*) and non-different (*advaita/abheda*), free from the dualistic experience which results from the attempts to conceptualise (*vipalka*) reality. This is state of limitless awareness and limitless silence.

Though discussion above, is about consciousness, we limit our discussion to mind modifications as consciousness shines on the mind. So as we can see from above discussion that our mind is busy during Waker state as well as Dreamer state. In the deep- sleep state as ego goes to subtle state, mind activity is greatly reduced. In Turiya state, mind goes into limitless silence. This is a state where mind loses its modifications and tries to get close to self of happiness. Given that mind drops its function of modification in Turiya state, the “ Anandmaya Kosha” shines on the “ Mental body” giving its strength to solve the problems of the mind when it comes to “ waker” state.

It is also explained in Mandukya karika on how we can reach the equilibrium state of mind to experience glimpses of limitless silence . *'In a state of mental inactivity awaken the mind; when agitated, calm it; between these two states realize the possible abilities of the mind. If the mind has reached that state of perfect equilibrium then do not disturb it again'* (Mandukya karika, 3/44) As could be understood from above Shloka that we need to observe current state of mind. When it is agitated, as it thinks about external world perceptions ( i.e waker state), calm it down so that we turn into subtle state of ego ( i.e sleep state). When you have calm down the mind , awaken it again to waker state ( i.e waker state). As you have done it repeatedly, then both waker state and sleep state of consciousness settle down to the underlying consciousness state ( i.e Turiya State). When once mind/consciousness reaches perfect state of equilibrium (i.e Turiya state), do not disturb it so that infinite bliss and happiness could be experienced in silence of form. This state of Mind could be practiced by methods based on Yoga practices.

**Conclusion:**

To conclude, Understanding the interplay between vrittis and stress offers a profound perspective on the ancient wisdom that addresses the root causes of mental distress. By cultivating awareness, practicing mindfulness, and transcending the fluctuations of the mind, individuals can navigate stress with greater resilience and move towards a state of inner harmony and balance.

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