Maslow's Humanism (Ideas of Humanistic psychology) Meets with the Neo-Classical Epistemology of Advaita Vedanta

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Abstract

This paper explores the convergence between Abraham Maslow's humanistic psychology and Advaita Vedanta, offering a framework that integrates modern psychological practices with the spiritual and philosophical wisdom of Vedantic epistemology. By connecting Maslow's hierarchy of needs, particularly self-actualization and self-transcendence, with the two forms of knowledge described in Advaita Vedanta—*Apara Vidya* (lower knowledge) and *Para Vidya* (higher knowledge)—the paper demonstrates how both systems contribute to a holistic understanding of human development. The relationship between deficiency needs and growth needs in Maslow's model mirrors the Vedantic distinction between existential knowledge for survival and cosmic consciousness for self-realization. This integrated framework offers a comprehensive approach to education, professional development, and personal growth, guiding individuals toward both practical wisdom and spiritual transcendence.

Keywords: Maslow, Advaita Vedanta, humanistic psychology, self-actualization, self-transcendence, Apara Vidya, Para Vidya

Introduction

Abraham Maslow's humanistic psychology emphasizes the importance of self-actualization, a process through which individuals realize their fullest potential. Maslow's later work also incorporated the concept of self-transcendence, the need to reach beyond oneself toward a greater, cosmic consciousness. In a parallel tradition, Advaita Vedanta, a school of philosophy rooted in non-dualism, articulates two forms of knowledge: *Apara Vidya* (practical, existential knowledge) and *Para Vidya* (higher, transcendental wisdom). By integrating Maslow's psychological framework with Vedantic philosophy, we can gain deeper insights into the interrelatedness of psychological, existential, and spiritual development. This paper seeks to connect these two traditions to propose a holistic approach to human growth and self-realization. Maslow's approach is very essential to understand Human development. So it is highly correlated with the perspectives of Vedanta, because Vedanta is highly realistic and humanistic. It helps to manifest our potentialities and lead out towards the stage of congruence (Roger, 1980) Similarly Rogers's self-theory is also associated with this doctrine where the perceived self-move towards ideal self. We can relate the idea of monism with the self-theory of humanistic paradigm of psychology. Because it's also says about fulfilment of one's innate potentiality. The main aim of vedanta is the union of the soul with the supreme soul (ATMAN/BRAMHA).

The Epistemology of Vedanta philosophy is more modern and dynamic than other Indian philosophies.
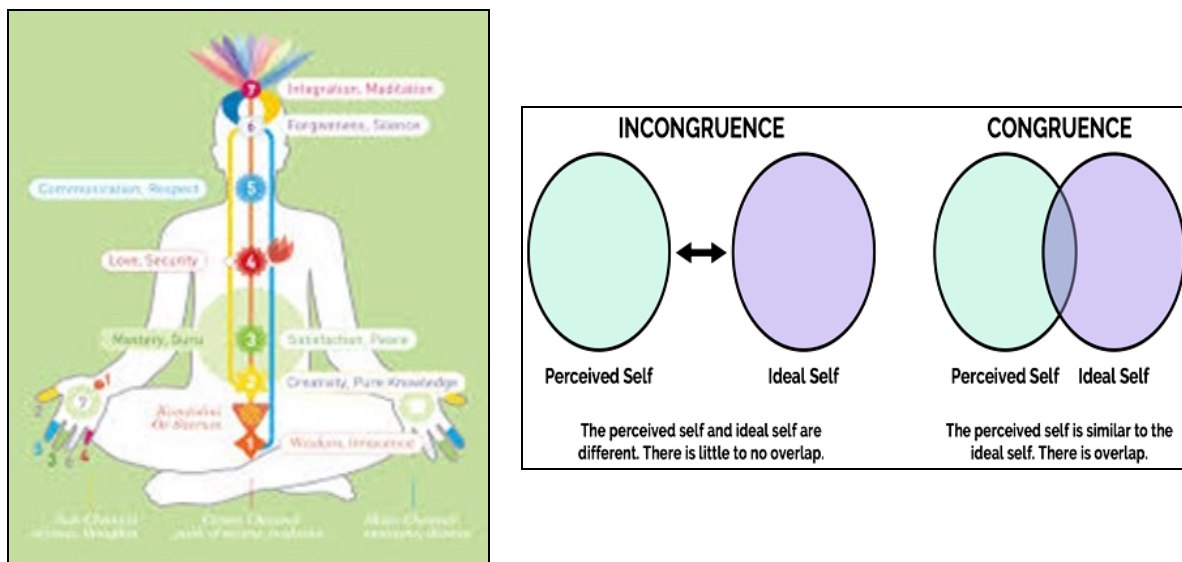
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Fig 1: Relation between Humanistic notions of Realization (Rogers's concept of self-fulfillment) and Vedantic epistemology

Vedanta says that, "Reality is not constituted by parts," that is, ever-changing 'things' have no existence of their own, but are appearances of the one Existent, Brahman; and that there is in reality no duality between the "experiencing self" (jiva) and Brahman, the Ground of Being. According to Swami Vivekananda's view we can say it as JIVA SEVA in the knowledge of SHIVA

There are so many dimensions of Vedantic epistemology…like,

Para Vidya and Apara Vidya (Integrating with Humanistic perspective)
- Scripture, Intellect and Intuition
- Truth
- Vrama
- Perception
- Inference
- Testimony
- Postulation
- Non–perception

1. Maslow's Humanistic Psychology
Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is often depicted as a pyramid, with basic physiological needs at the base and self-actualization at the pinnacle. According to Maslow, individuals are motivated by a series of needs: starting from physiological needs such as food and shelter, to safety needs, social belonging, esteem, and finally, self-actualization. Self-actualization represents the realization of one's full potential, including creativity, authenticity, and a sense of purpose. Later, Maslow expanded his model to include self-transcendence, the drive to connect with something greater than oneself, whether through helping others, engaging in spirituality, or contributing to a larger cause (Maslow, 1971) [2].

Maslow's hierarchy is often divided into deficiency needs (the lower levels, which include physiological, safety, social, and esteem needs) and growth needs (the higher levels, particularly self-actualization and self-transcendence). The deficiency needs are considered foundational; they must be met before individuals can pursue higher-order growth needs. However, Maslow also acknowledged that the pursuit of self-actualization and self-transcendence could bring a sense of fulfillment and meaning that goes beyond the self.

2. Advaita Vedanta and Knowledge
Advaita Vedanta, a philosophical system rooted in non-dualism, presents a profound metaphysical view of the universe. According to Advaita Vedanta, the ultimate reality is *Brahman*, an unchanging, singular consciousness that transcends all distinctions. The individual soul, *Atman*, is ultimately not separate from Brahman, but an expression of it (Sankara, 1991) [3].

In Advaita Vedanta, knowledge is classified into two categories:
- **Apara Vidya** (lower knowledge): This refers to practical, existential knowledge—knowledge of the material world necessary for survival. It includes sensory perception, logic, and intellectual understanding, and is considered essential for living in the world (Sankara, 1991) [3].
- **Para Vidya** (higher knowledge): This is the knowledge of ultimate reality, the realization of non-duality and the oneness of Atman and Brahman. It transcends the material world and ego, leading to liberation (*moksha*) and cosmic consciousness (Sankara, 1991) [3].

Shankaracharya, the key proponent of Advaita Vedanta, emphasized that both types of knowledge are necessary. Apara Vidya is required to navigate the material world, but it ultimately serves as a stepping stone to Para Vidya, the higher wisdom that leads to spiritual liberation.

3. Integrating Maslow's Hierarchy with Advaita Vedanta
Maslow's model of psychological development can be mapped onto the two forms of knowledge in Advaita Vedanta. The deficiency needs (physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem) can be related to Apara Vidya, the practical knowledge required for survival and existential fulfillment. Apara Vidya represents the wisdom needed to satisfy these basic needs, ensuring a stable and secure existence.

In contrast, Maslow's growth needs, particularly self-actualization and self-transcendence, align with Para Vidya, the higher knowledge of the non-dual reality of Brahman. Just as self-actualization involves realizing one's fullest potential, Para Vidya involves realizing the deepest truth of the universe, transcending the ego and experiencing unity with all of existence.

Maslow's self-transcendence (1969) is particularly relevant here, as it echoes the ultimate goal of Advaita Vedanta—

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liberation or moksha. Self-transcendence, for Maslow, involves reaching out to others and experiencing interconnectedness, a concept that resonates deeply with the Vedantic idea of the dissolution of the individual ego and the merging with the universal consciousness.

"Para Vidya" (Meta Theoretical or B-cognition)
"Apara Vidya" (Existential or D-cognition)
These two approaches of wisdom are classified by Adi Shankaracharya. Para Vidya means High level of wisdom, it is the highest level of cosmic consciousness and experience of emancipation. And another is Apara Vidya, it is the lower level of cognition which is the practical wisdom which is important for living and existence.
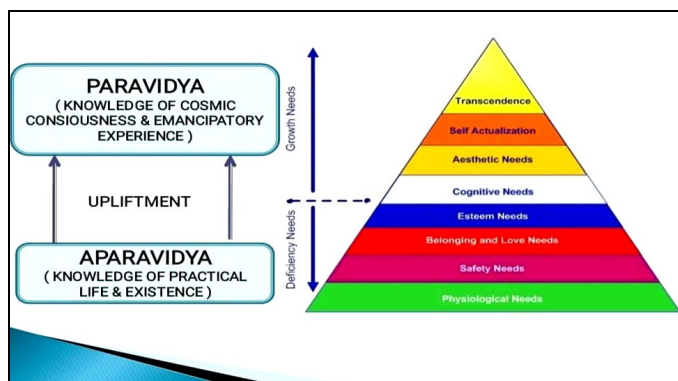
Fig 2: Correlating Maslow's stance with Vedantic approach of epistemology

According to Shankaracharya both are equally important for the development. Many people think that the second order cognition of Vedant is totally valued but Shankaracharya thinks that apraVidya helps to reach paravidya, apravidya which essentially acts as a ladder to reach the highest level of self realisation. In that case Abraham Maslow's hierarchy is very relevant and related to it. The Deficiency needs hierarchy like physiological, safety etc. we can relate with the lower order cognition, so we can classify it as the apra Vidya which is essential knowledge for existence for our physiology and safety purpose. Simultaneously the growth need for Meta needs is related to the higher order cognition or the self-actualization or realisation. We can relate our argument with self-transcendence. It means reaching out to others throughout our cosmic consciousness.

According to Our Observation We can State the Epistemic Orientation of Vedanta Relating with Humanistic Psychology as-
Para Vidya as "Experiential": It deals with various experiential activities and helps to emancipating ourselves. This stage involves various aspects regarding our manifestation. Higher learning or learning related to the Self or the Ultimate Truth i.e. transcendental knowledge. Vedanta affirms that those who gain the knowledge of the Self attain kaivalya, they become liberated. It denotes the higher need fulfilment of Maslow's hierarchy.
Apara Vidya as "Existential" (Herzberg, 1959) or "Survival": It deals with the basic needs of human existence. It helps to grow us as "street smart". Knowledge of the world – of objects, events, means, ends, virtues and vices. Apara vidya consists of Rig, Yajur, Sama, Atharva vedas and sciences such as Shiksha (details formation of words and their pronunciation), Kalpam (rules for doing karma), Grammar – Vyakaranam, Niruktham (explanation of vedas), Chandas

(grammar of songs in vedas), Jyotisham-astrology (knowledge of time as per position. It denotes the Initial need fulfilment of Maslow's hierarchy.

4. Apara Vidya as a Stepping Stone to Para Vidya
Shankaracharya's view that Apara Vidya is a necessary foundation for reaching Para Vidya mirrors Maslow's assertion that deficiency needs must be met before growth needs can be pursued. Practical knowledge, grounded in the fulfillment of basic needs, provides the stability and security needed for spiritual inquiry. In other words, the existential and material aspects of life (Apara Vidya) create the conditions for the pursuit of higher wisdom and self-realization (Para Vidya).
Maslow himself later incorporated the idea of self-transcendence into his hierarchy, acknowledging that after achieving self-actualization, individuals may feel a calling to connect with something greater than themselves. This mirrors the Vedantic understanding of transcendence, where the realization of one's true self (Atman) leads to the realization of the oneness of all existence with Brahman.

5. Considering the level of knowledge system according to Vedantic Stance
Vedant says three types of teaching methods primarily extracted from the idea of" Dhi guna", they are
i). Sharavanā (listing)
ii). Mananā (Insighting)
iii). Nidhidhyasanā (Reflecting)

Shloka from Kāmandak NitiShastra:
"Sushrashang sravanam chaiva grahanam dharanam tatha uha poharta vigyanam tatwa gyanam sapta dhi guna"
**A Detailed Analysis:** From this verse, we can extract three primary components related to quality enhancement in education:
Shravana (Listening): This represents the foundational act of learning by listening, gathering knowledge from external sources**.**
Manana (Insight): This step involves deep reflection and contemplation, developing a deeper understanding of the knowledge absorbed.
Nididhyasana (Introspection): The final stage involves personal introspection, internalizing and applying the knowledge for self-realization.
These stages reflect the levels of learning and are deeply embedded in the traditional Indian educational system, emphasizing not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the quality of introspective thinking.
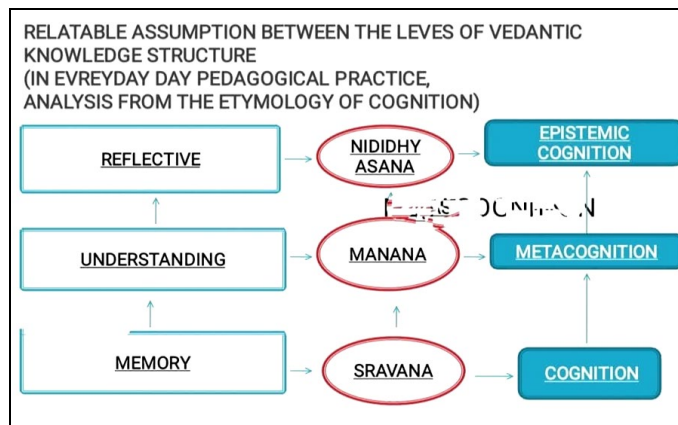
Fig 3: Relating cognitive activities with vedantic knowledge acquisition

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If we think reflectively about it, we can correlate the

- Shravana stage with the memory level of teaching proposed by Herbert, which totally depends on listening encoding and ability to reproduce the delivered contents. In vedic time it is called Shruti that means listening to the lecture meaningfully then reproducing and reciting properly.
- 2nd stage Mananā is related to the stage of understanding proposed by the American professor Morrison. It means properly inheriting and perceiving the innate meaning of the content and it is also an ability to grasp the subject matter comprehensively.
- And the last one is Nidhidhyasanā, it can be related with the concept of reflection and introspective level of teaching. We can also relate these things with the modern approach of teaching the famous fee step model of cognitive processing.

6. Implications for Holistic Education and Personal Development

Integrating Maslow's humanistic psychology with Advaita Vedanta offers a more comprehensive approach to personal and professional development. Traditional education often emphasizes cognitive and practical skills (Apara Vidya), but an integrated approach that includes spiritual wisdom (Para Vidya) can lead to more holistic development.

In the context of teaching and learning, educators can draw from both Apara Vidya and Para Vidya to cultivate students who are not only knowledgeable in practical skills but also capable of experiencing personal growth, self-actualization, and ultimately, spiritual transcendence. This holistic approach emphasizes not just intellectual growth, but the development of emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of the self.

Conclusion

The integration of Maslow's humanistic psychology with Advaita Vedanta provides a rich framework for understanding human development. The practical, existential knowledge of Apara Vidya supports the fulfillment of Maslow's deficiency needs, while the higher knowledge of Para Vidya resonates with Maslow's growth needs, particularly self-actualization and self-transcendence. By recognizing the importance of both forms of knowledge, we can create a more comprehensive understanding of human growth—one that embraces both the material and the spiritual dimensions of existence. Ultimately, this integrated approach offers a path toward both individual fulfillment and cosmic consciousness.

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