

The Panchakosha Model in Contemporary Mental Health: A New Paradigm for Depression

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Abstract

One of the most common mental disorders, yet problematic enough to obstruct even everyday tasks of an individual, is Depression. In the last few decades it has spread rapidly at a global level. Scientists and researchers have been able to track down many causes as well as ways to treat it. However, strong medication comes with its own harmful side effects. Thus, people nowadays are willing to shift toward something more holistic and reliable which promotes overall health.

This paper intends to discuss the known causes of depression and how the Panchakosha model can act as a holistic and complementary approach to overcome it, along with pathological treatment. Panchakosha is a Vedic concept that elaborates upon the five koshas/sheaths with which the human body is believed to be made. These sheaths encompass the Atman, which is the True Consciousness and its nature is Bliss or Ananda. Panchakosha doctrine explains that the Atman is veiled by these five concentric sheaths and to experience Bliss one has to transcend the five sheaths.

In this paper, I would like to shed some light on how these different sheaths can be understood, accessed and healed. During this process of healing, depression can also be tackled and the individual is led to Ananda. A qualitative textual analysis of some relevant ancient Indian scriptures and contemporary scientific literature has been done. References from *Taittiriya Upanishad*, Patanjali's *Yog Sutra* or the *Bhagavad Gita* have been made to explore the

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Panchakosha model in depth and then practical therapeutic approaches have been suggested suitable to the modern times.

Keywords: Depression, Panchakosha, Taittiriya Upanishad, Ananda, Atman

Introduction:

Depression, also known as major depressive disorder or clinical depression, is a mental disorder and has been defined differently by numerous psychiatric and psychological organizations. Yet, it could be understood as a dysfunctionality of the brain during which the experiencer feels utterly sad all or most of the time. They start losing pleasure in everything and even basic daily tasks, like bathing and eating, become tough for them.

Lawrence E. Shapiro calls it the “common cold” of mental health problems, in his PhD thesis *Overcoming Depression*, due to its commonality ¹. Despite its wide occurrence it’s a serious disorder as “nearly three in ten adults (29%) have been diagnosed with depression at some point in their lives and about 18% are currently experiencing depression, according to a 2023 national survey” (Onyemaechi, 2024). What makes it a matter of concern is its gradual development up till the stage of suicidal thoughts. These thoughts can overpower the person’s will to live when they don’t get treated timely.

Depression, at its core, often arises from an identification with transient states—painful thoughts, emotions, bodily discomfort, and restless mind patterns. The Panchakosha model, rooted in the ancient wisdom of the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, provides us an avenue to explore the Self as composed of five concentric sheaths or layers, namely: Annamaya Kosha — the physical body, Pranamaya Kosha — the vital energy and breath, Manomaya Kosha — the mind and emotions,

Vijnanamaya Kosha — intellect and discernment and Anandamaya Kosha — blissful sheath, the subtlest layer of joy.

When depression manifests, it is primarily the Manomaya Kosha that is overwhelmed—where negative thoughts, sadness, and emotional turmoil reside. Yet, we must understand that these agitations are like waves on the surface of an ocean, not the ocean itself. Panchakosha Viveka—the practice of discerning “I am not these sheaths”—helps the individual recognize that these depressive states belong to the mind-body complex, not the true Self. By gently observing and differentiating the layers, one begins to disentangle from the grip of depressive thoughts and feelings. Then it is no longer seen as an identity, but as a passing phenomenon within the koshas. This shift creates psychological distance and fosters self-compassion, hope, and a grounded resilience.

Let's first delve into the apparent symptoms and possible causes of depression, as traced by scientists over decades of research. Then we would have an in-depth study of all the sheaths. Finally, we would try to establish the nexus between depression and how it can be treated with Panchakosha Viveka as a complementary model, alongside medical treatment, synergising the power of Pharmacotherapy and Vedantic wisdom.

Symptoms of Depression:

Depressive episodes could be experienced by a person of any age but are generally said to occur after the 20's and in old age. This state could be triggered by any traumatic experience in a person's life like death of a loved one, divorce, constant career failures and the like. Some mental/emotional symptoms of depression, as generally experienced by people, but not limited to, are: extreme sadness, emptiness, feeling as if they're always on the brink of tears. The person is shrouded with

guilt, despair, unworthiness, fixation on failures and self-blame. They feel irritated and frustrated most of the time, sometimes leading to anger outbursts over trivial matters. They find it hard to think, concentrate, speak or remember. A feeling of anxiety/ restlessness is also quite persistent. If the case is severe, the experiencer may even have suicidal thoughts and resort to self-harm.

Although depression is a mental disorder, there are some physical symptoms also. These could include: Disturbed eating habits: either increased food cravings and sudden weight gain or reduced appetite and weight loss. Sleep disruptions – either insomnia or oversleeping. People feel intense fatigue and physical exhaustion at even the least energy consuming activities. Such people lose interest in most or all of the activities that they used to like before. An unresolvable issue that they can't seem to find a cause for are aches in different body parts, like headaches and backaches (Sawchuk, 2022).

Causes of Depression:

Initially it was believed that depression is caused by some chemical changes in the brain; however, further research has clarified that there could be several other factors as well. I will divide these causes into three main types – biological/physiological, mental/ emotional/ psychological and, cultural/ social & environmental – though the distinction between them might be blurry at times.

BIOLOGICAL/ PHYSIOLOGICAL CAUSES:

1. *Serotonin reduction:*

Some early research suggested that depression was caused by a drop in the production and functionality of the neurotransmitters, like serotonin or dopamine. Serotonin, as a neurotransmitter, helps in carrying messages to and from the brain. It plays some crucial bodily functions like

regulating body temperature, sleep cycle, appetite, sexual behaviour, learning and memory (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). Why some early researchers believed that a drop in the levels of serotonin cause anxiety and depression were because it is also a hormone and helps in regulating one's mood. They thought that when the brain's workings are disrupted and the serotonin levels face a dip, the person can suffer from anxiety or depression at that time.

2. Depression causing/carrying genes:

At times, a history of depression running across generations is found in a family. The researches which were conducted for the same aimed at finding out gene(s) which could be responsible for carrying an element that possibly caused depression. The scientists successfully traced such a gene, named LTT-5, which can increase the risk of depression but it can not 'cause' depression.

Humans have evolved over thousands of years and so have the functional modalities of their bodies and minds. The earliest humans organized themselves into tribal groups. They had to stay vigilant of all possible dangers lurking around at all times, like being attacked by a rival tribe or a predator attacking them. Thus, they always stayed in groups so that they could attack in unity if ever faced with any such peril.

Any individual who fell sick or got themselves hurt, needed time to recover. The group, therefore, encouraged them to stay alone to recuperate. However, staying alone instilled a fear of being attacked in them. This fear didn't surface when they were in groups as they knew they could face it together with each others' support but when alone, they couldn't grapple with it. This constant terror helped them stay alert of their surroundings, acting in their favour, by allowing them to quickly respond if ever faced with something unexpected. But this came at a cost for the

early humans as it made their nervous system inflamed and brought out the risk behaviour in them which made them sad/depressed.

Such genes are still present in our body and act in a similar fashion by keeping us vigilant whenever we are in a troubled environment. If we stay there for very long, our nervous system responds accordingly and we become depressed. Hence, it is inevitable to understand that such genes lie dormant until the individual is not put in a pressurizing environment (Bullmore, 2018).

3. Neuroplasticity:

It is an emerging concept in medical science that reveals a new aspect of the functioning of the brain. ‘Neuro’ refers to neurons and ‘plasticity’ means the brain’s ability to restructure/reorganize itself as per the need. Neuroplasticity, therefore, can be described in layman terms as: “the brain's ability to change and adapt due to experience. It is an umbrella term referring to the brain's ability to change, reorganize, or grow neural networks. This can involve functional changes due to brain damage or structural changes due to learning” (Cherry, 2024).

It is an important growth in depression centered research as it suggests that the brain can create new neurons and neural pathways/ networks to respond in accordance to the stimuli. In depression patients, the neurological pathways are dysregulated due to which they cannot properly process heavy/negative emotions and remain sad most of the time.

EMOTIONAL/ PSYCHOLOGICAL CAUSES:

1. Childhood trauma:

Any person who has been through a traumatic childhood, for instance, having abusive parents, facing sexual/verbal assault by family, bullying at school, losing a parent/loved one, or

anything of that sort could make them develop depression during an overwhelming phase of life. An article titled *The link between childhood trauma and depression: Insights from HPA axis studies in humans* says, “Epidemiological studies have provided strong evidence that adverse experience during childhood, such as abuse, neglect or loss, is associated with dramatic increases in the risk to develop depression” (Heim et al., 2008).

Though it's not necessary that a person who has had a rough childhood will inevitably experience depression during adulthood, it increases the chances manifold as their HPA axis is altered and their central stress response system becomes more sensitized to stress. Therefore, their threshold of bearing stress will be lowered and they could develop clinical depression as soon as there will be causative agents in their environment.

2. *Social hierarchy:*

The hierarchical structure of a society/organization matters to each individual because humans, just like animals, run their lives in networks. For instance, a corporate company where the owner is at the topmost level, the CEO and other managers follow the owner, while the employees of the company are at the bottom. The ones at the top of this network wield power and enjoy a safe, comfortable work environment, while the ones at the bottom are always hustling, grinding and just waiting to receive orders. The employees do not have any autonomy and can't take decisions on their own. This shatters their confidence and they start doubting their worthiness in the organization.

A person frames their sense of identity, uniqueness and individuality when their ideas are respected and implemented. However, they shrink and feel lowly about themselves when they cannot contribute to the growth of their working/living space in any form. Individuals like that, as

researches suggest, are generally stressed and can develop depression if they continue to have such feelings of inferiority and unworthiness for a long period (Hari, 2018).

SOCIAL/CULTURAL CAUSES:

1. Culture and response to Depression:

Every person is born in a certain cultural setup that affects their thinking, perception, belief systems, values et al. As we have already read by now, every individual has a unique genotype too and their stress related genes come into play depending on their surroundings. The cultural setup and response to stress, in that sense, are undeniably dependent on each other. As per Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development, a person's formal operational stage develops between the age of 11-19. This phase is crucial because they become self conscious of their behaviour and try to act in morally and ethically acceptable ways. When they are unable to comply with the same, feelings of guilt and shame start creeping in.

Culture here becomes a deciding factor of the extent of the individual's depression. While some societies have more fluid values, people there generally don't feel bound to do certain stuff and thus guilt or shame could not bother them that easily. A person could experience the same at a much higher degree, within the same set of circumstances, if they are deeply rooted in their values and morals.

The way their depressive symptoms will be reflected would also highly vary. The stigma surrounding depression varies between cultures. For example, schizophrenia is more acceptable among Balinese than depression. They will be negative towards people who suffer from depression because in their belief, the possibility of experiencing depression is small and when it occurs, they are pessimistic that depression can improve. In Japan, the level of stigma against

depression and schizophrenia is equally high, although depression is at slightly lower levels than schizophrenia. Black Americans with depression will be labeled “crazy” and “weak” (Gani et al., 2022, pp. 77-85).

2. Junk Values and Consumerism:

In this consumerist world, we are constantly fed with services and products which we majorly buy not because of their features but because of their brand value. That value is created by advertisements. TV, social media platforms, radio, billboards etc., every brand is endorsing its products or services through an influential personality, a well-renowned personality. We feel compelled to fit into this competitive world as the brands we buy suggest our ‘social status’. The items which were designed to comfort us or make our lives smoother have eventually become the agents of restlessness. We keep on aspiring for more, never settling. Such a chase of materialistic possessions can never make us feel satiated.

We have unconsciously started becoming a part of this never-ending chase because of the junk values that are rampant in our society these days. “Junk Values are the KFC of our soul” (Hari, 2018, p. 95). People in the earlier eras never faced an issue as they were more focused on accomplishing intrinsic goals i.e., having a healthy life, maintaining relationships well, becoming a better person and so on. Such goals have now almost vanished from people’s minds and they are only inclined to achieve extrinsic goals – a big house, luxury cars, huge social circle. As the researches have explained, such people are always unsatisfied and have higher levels of anxiety & depression.

ENVIRONMENTAL CAUSES:

Inability to connect with nature:

Some contemporary researches have identified the crucial role which nature plays in the maintenance of our health. This is not only restricted to the vital supplements we gain from a balanced, nutrient rich diet but also includes the way we spend our time out in the natural environment. A research on animals suggested that they felt more depressed when they were put in a cage, not only because their freedom was curtailed but also because they were away from their natural habitat. The same is applicable for humans as well because we too have evolved from being the primates, who lived in the forests for thousands of years. This is why we inherently prefer going away from the bustling cityscape to the quiet and serene mountains during a vacation. A daily interaction with nature is, thus, indispensable for our overall health.

Indian approach for tackling Depression:

So far we have walked through some major causes of MDD and seen how they can become overbearing at times. One does need to resort to pharmacotherapy for its treatment but amalgamating it with some other mind-calming practices or tools could catalyse the recuperation. Mental illnesses (including depression, at times) find mention in various ancient Indian texts like the Vedas, Upanishads, seminal Ayurvedic works like Caraka Samhita and Susruta Samhita, Patanjali's Yog Sutra, and epics like the Bhagavada Gita. The reach and appeal of these texts has now spread globally due to their contemporary relevance and embeddedness in practicality. Murthy says, "One of Indian contributions to one's well being in general and mental health in particular, practiced worldwide, is yoga and meditation" (Murthy, 2010). But even to only touch upon the causes and treatment of depression as mentioned in these texts would be quite a lot to be inculcated in this article alone. So, at this juncture, I would just introduce the Panchakosha theory,

as expounded in the Taittiriya Upanishad, and then enumerate some practices which induce healing. Upon engaging in these activities regularly, one is able to break free from the loop of pessimism and experience happiness again. However, this knowledge doesn't only help in dealing with depression. Rather, it acts as a holistic approach which would impart profound knowledge of the composition of one's body, its integration with the mind, and how to take care of both. Anju K Ojha and Pawan K Dhar state in their article titled *Rethinking education: Why ancient wisdom might be the future?*

Education is a powerful tool in handling mental health conditions on multiple levels. In the present situation, the holistic approach would educate learners on mental health conditions and coping mechanisms and empower them to identify potential issues early toward effective intervention. Training learners in stress management, emotional regulation, and social connection equips them with tools to navigate challenges and build resilience against mental health issues (Ojha & Dhar, 2024, p. 143).

As awareness and education are the first step toward healing, let's now have an understanding of our body as per this Vedantic doctrine titled 'Panchakosha.'

The Panchakosha Doctrine: A Vedantic Model of Consciousness and Healing:

The doctrine of Panchakosha (Sanskrit: *pancha-kosha*, meaning "five sheaths") is primarily expounded in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, a key text of the *Krishna Yajurveda* (Yogapedia, 2023).

This model conceptualizes the human being as composed of five concentric layers or sheaths that veil the Atman, the true Self. These five layers are:

- Annamaya Kosha
- Pranamaya Kosha

- Manomaya Kosha
- Vijnanamaya Kosha
- Anandamaya Kosha

In the Vedantic tradition, a human being is viewed as a multi-layered manifestation of consciousness, not merely a physical entity. The Panchakosha model provides an ontological and psychological framework to explore these layers. Each sheath represents a level of embodiment, ranging from gross to subtle, through which the Self is experienced yet ultimately concealed. The spiritual path is therefore seen as an inward journey of self-inquiry and transcendence, moving through each sheath until the Self is realized as distinct from all of them. As expounded in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*:

...the self made of the vital force indwells and is different from the self made of food; within that is the self made of mind and the self made of intellect. Thus (by stages) the self has been made to enter into the cavity of the intellect. And there, again, has been presented a distinct self that is made of bliss. After this, through the comprehension of the blissful self which acts as a pointer (to the Bliss Brahman), one has to realise, within this very cavity of the heart, that Self as the culmination of the growth of bliss, which is Brahman (conceived of) as the stabilising tail (of the blissful self), which is the support of all modifications and which is devoid of all modifications. (Gambhirananda p.337)

This layered view of the self is not merely theoretical—it has significant practical applications, particularly in the context of mental health and inner healing. Mental disorders like depression, and anxiety often stem from imbalances not just in the physical or mental layers, but also in the subtler dimensions of being. Modern medicine typically addresses the physical body and

neurological functions, but often neglects deeper, subtle causes of suffering that are rooted in aspects of consciousness beyond the physical or mental layers.

Lately there has been a global and radical shift in the exclusionary approach of the medicinal field. People have now started adopting mindfulness, yoga and other such techniques, for maintaining their physical and mental health, however, Panchakosha Viveka—the practice of discerning “I am not these sheaths”—helps the individual recognize that these depressive states belong to the mind-body complex, not the true Self. By gently observing and differentiating the layers, one begins to disentangle from the grip of depressive thoughts and feelings and experiences true bliss.

So, now, let’s closely look at each sheath – understand its formational basis, the issues that can arise due to imbalances in it, and how to heal it.

Annamaya Kosha: The Gross Sheath

Annamaya Kosha is the outermost sheath, the gross physical body constituted by ‘anna’ or food. The Taittiriya Upanishad, in the Ananda-Valli (Shloka 2.2.1), introduces the Annamayakosha with a profound reflection on the origin, sustenance, and dissolution of living beings:

“अन्नादेव खल्विमानि भूतानि जायन्ते।

अन्नेन जातानि जीवन्ति।

अन्नं प्रयन्त्यभिसंविशन्ति।”

“From food, verily, are all beings born. By food they live, and into food they ultimately merge” (Wara KarmaYoga, n.d., sloka 2.2.1).

This verse not only affirms the ontological role of food (anna) in the emergence and maintenance of life but also establishes the ephemerality and cyclicity of the physical form. The

Annamayakosha is thus not merely the flesh-and-bone structure but an organic configuration of the “five elements (*Pancha Bhutas*), namely earth (*Prithvi*) (पृथ्वी), water (*Jala* or *Apa*) (जल), fire (*Agni* or *Tejas*) (तेजस), wind (*Vayu*) (वायु), and space (*Akash*) (आकाश)” (Goyal, 2023)—solidified into perceptible matter. It includes the visible bodily components, the material basis of the jnanendriyas (organs of knowledge) and karmendriyas (organs of action), as well as the digestive and metabolic systems, which are vital in the transformation of food into bodily substance.

Disturbances in this sheath can obstruct the inward movement of consciousness. An imbalanced Annamayakosha—due to poor nutrition, excessive or deficient sensory activity, lack of physical movement, or environmental toxicity—can lead to physical ailments and dysfunction in the subtler sheaths, particularly the Pranamayakosha and Manomayakosha.

Even science has now made expositions of the link between food we consume and its effects on the mind and emotions: “about 95% of your serotonin is produced in your gastrointestinal tract, and your gastrointestinal tract is lined with a hundred million nerve cells, or neurons, it makes sense that the inner workings of your digestive system don't just help you digest food, but also guide your emotions” (Selhub, 2022). They further say that processed and refined foods also dysregulate insulin production, increase inflammation and oxidative stress, thus worsening mood disorders or depressive symptoms.

Though these are the remarks by modern scientists, Ayurvedic scholars have already clarified “food as [not] a mere body fuel but an excellent influencer of mental and emotional states. Ayurveda categorized food with its *gunas*², and it shows the influence food would have on the

²Ayurveda recognizes three physical humors or doshas (*vata*, *pitta* and *kapha*) as well as three mental humors (*satva*, *rajas* and *tamas*). The Acharya Charaka describes the *gunas* as- *Tamas* (Inertia, darkness), *Rajas* (Momentum, desire), *Satva* (Peace, balance, steady) (Sharma & Sapra, 2019, p. 14).

Doshas in the body. It provides an all-around approach to diet and mental health” (Ramani, 2025). Bearing this in mind, one must be considerate of their diet and eating habits and consume seasonal foods, as per the capacity of one’s body.

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali emphasize the interdependence of body and mind, affirming in *Sutra 2.46* which is explained by Seema Rani Yadav in her article:

“स्थिरसुखमासनम्।”

“Āsana is a posture that is steady and comfortable.”

“This sūtra can be considered as a definition of the ideal state of an āsana: That which is maintained with stability and in a pleasurable state.” This explains that when we start training the body through asana, the mind also becomes focused (Yadav, 2014, p.78).

Though asana primarily belongs to the yogic domain, its effect on the Annamayakosha is undeniable—it strengthens and stabilizes the body, thereby creating a firm foundation for deeper meditative absorption and inner purification.

Furthermore, the Bhagavad Gita (Ch 6 verse 17) echoes the Upanishadic emphasis on moderation and discipline in bodily life:

“युक्ताहारविहारस्य युक्तचेष्टस्य कर्मसु।

युक्तस्वप्नावबोधस्य

योगो

भवति

दुःखहा॥”

“Yoga becomes the destroyer of sorrow for one who is moderate in eating and recreation, moderate in working, and regulated in sleep and wakefulness.”

From the perspective of spiritual sadhana, the Annamayakosha is to be cared for, purified, and transcended. Its purification involves adherence to sattvic ahara (pure food habits), which are light, fresh, and conducive to clarity. The practice of shaucha – physical and mental cleanliness, along with other seasonal detox practices as elaborated majorly in Ayurveda. Engaging in daily body

movement through the practice of yog asanas, brisk walking or exercises is non-negotiable. Maintaining the circadian rhythm and by getting up before sunrise or during brahma muhurata (around 1 hr 36 mins before sunrise) are also sound practices which one should follow.

In conclusion, the Annamayakosha, while composed of inert matter, is rendered sacred by virtue of its role in spiritual realization. Though ultimately to be transcended, it remains the foundation of all experience and the initial ground for yogic discipline. As such, the seeker must learn to both respect and transcend this sheath—caring for the body as a temple of the Self, yet not mistaking it for the Self itself.

Pranamaya Kosha: The Vital-Energy Sheath

The Pranamaya Kosha is the second layer, subtler than the Annamaya Kosha and shielded inside it, this kosha allows the flow of ‘prana’-- the vital energy which supports and sustains life, through it.

The *Taittiriya Upanishad* (Brahmananda-valli, verse 2.3.1) states:

प्राणं देवा अनु प्राणन्ति । मनुष्याः पशवश्च ये ।
प्राणो हि भूतानामायुः । तस्मात् सर्वायुषमुच्यते ।
सर्वमेव त आयुर्यन्ति । ये प्राणं ब्रह्मोपासते ।
प्राणो हि भूतानामायुः । तस्मात् सर्वायुषमुच्यत इति ।
तस्यैष एव शरीर आत्मा । यः पूर्वस्य ।
तस्माद्वा एतस्मात् प्राणमयात्

The senses act by following the vital force in the mouth; all human beings and animals that are there act similarly; since on the vital force depends the life of all creatures, therefore it

is called the life of all; those who worship the vital force as Brahman, attain the full span of life; since on the vital force depends the life of all, it is called the life of all.

This sheath is intangible, imperceptible, fluid. The movement of dynamic, ever-flowing prana, which enters the body through breath, happens through nadis which are subtle energy channels. It plays a crucial role in sustaining the functioning of both sensory and motor organs. The five types of vital pranas which flow through the nadis are: prana (governing respiration), apana (elimination), samana (digestion and assimilation), udana (speech and upward movement), and vyana (circulation). These operate in a complex energetic system that underlies and orchestrates all physiological processes. Thus we can say that it facilitates action. But, it is also highly responsive to emotional and mental states, and can be influenced—either balanced or disturbed—by one's breath patterns, diet, sleep, environment, and psychological disposition.

When this vital sheath is in balance, one experiences energy, vitality, clarity, and emotional stability. However, when there are imbalances due to improper breathing, sedentary lifestyle, stress or underlying unprocessed emotions then they manifest as different disorders.

The physiological issues caused could be fatigue, indigestion, weak circulatory flow, shortness of breath and hormonal imbalance. At the psychological level, one can experience anxiety, restlessness, or depression. Even modern science has confirmed that due to irregular or shallow breathing, there occurs vagus nerve dysregulation, cortisol imbalances and neurotransmitter deficiencies – all of which are notable physiological features of depression.

As we already discussed earlier, some scientific studies have shown that stress plays an important role in the dysregulation of the HPA axis. HPA axis is a neuroendocrine system and consists of 3 organs, namely: hypothalamus, pituitary gland and adrenal glands. This system releases cortisol i.e., the stress hormone. Secretion of cortisol in optimum amounts is important to

keep us motivated and vigilant. However, chronic production and secretion of cortisol in excessive amounts can lead to dysregulation of the HPA axis which is linked to other psychological disorders such as depression, mood disorders and even Alzheimer's Disease (Cleveland Clinic, 2024).

However, Panchakosha Viveka explains that:

“When the supply of prana to the brain is insufficient, the mind becomes agitated and anxious. It lacks the energy needed to become concentrated, focused and void of mental clutter. When the supply is deficient for a prolonged period, one can suffer from depression or nervous breakdown. In the body, this can lead to perspiration, trembling in the organs and difficulty in standing. Mentally it can result in excessive negativity, insomnia, and unwillingness to communicate” (Suri, 2019).

As per Patanjali's Yog Sutra, practising Pranayama can help to restore balance in this kosha. He defines pranayama as the conscious regulation of inhalation, exhalation, and retention of breath: “तस्मिन्सति श्वासप्रश्वासयोगतिविच्छेदः प्राणायामः ॥ २.४९ ॥

tasminsati śvāsapraśvāsayorgativicchedaḥ prāṇāyāmaḥ || 2.49 ||

(49) That (asana) having been perfected, regulation of the flow of inhalation and exhalation is pranayama.”

The Sanskrit word "pranayama" is created by combining the terms "prana," which means life breath or vital energy, and "ayama," which means expansion, regulation, or control (Kumari et al, 2025, pp. 85-87). The Practice of Pranayama leads to greater oxygen supply to the blood stream. As a result, greater amounts of oxygen is available for cerebral metabolism

Practising pranayama regularly has also helped people in the regulation of HPA axis, “While the precise mechanism of action has not been determined, it has been hypothesized that some yoga exercises cause a shift toward parasympathetic nervous system dominance, possibly

via direct vagal stimulation” (Sengupta, 2012, p. 446). Brown and Gerbarg (2005), writing in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, highlight how practices such as Sudarshan Kriya, a breath-based technique derived from ancient pranayama, helps in significantly reducing the effects of anxiety and depression. Techniques such as nadi shodhan (alternate nostril breathing), bhamari (humming breath), and ujjayi (victorious breath) are particularly beneficial for restoring energetic harmony and promoting emotional calm. Apart from breathwork, we should also activate the pranic flow through eating sattvic foods, grounding, soaking sunlight and spending time in nature (Everhart, 2023).

Manomaya Kosha: The Mental Sheath

The sheath that lies inside the Pranamaya Kosha is the Manomaya Kosha. It is the layer in which the mind or Manas resides, as per the Hindu scripture *Taittiriya Upanishad*. The Sloka 2.3.1 states:

अन्योऽन्तर आत्मा मनोमयः ।

तेनैष पूर्णः । स वा एष पुरुषविध एव ।

anyo'ntara ātmā manomayaḥ .

tenaiṣa pūrṇaḥ . sa vā eṣa puruṣavidha eva .

Than that, verily,—than this one formed of Prāṇa,—there is another self within formed of Manas (thought-stuff). By him this one is filled. He, verily, this one, is quite of man's shape (Wara KarmaYoga, n.d., sloka 2.3.1).

The active part or 'manas' consists of the five senses called 'jnanendriyas' which collect the sensory input. Chitta is the storehouse where all past experiences and associated emotions are stored. Ahamkara is the ego which aids one in shaping their identity as 'I' which often creates an illusion of separation from others. A swift recycling of thoughts takes place in this layer which is

eventually supported by the Ego. Thence, the development of strong emotions such as likes, dislikes, love, hate, guilt, pride etc occurs (Paijwar et al., 2023).

Prolonged attachment to these emotions creates one's personality. When these emotions override a person's discerning ability, they start acting against the cosmic laws. Since thoughts are quickly manufactured here, the mind becomes agitated when it is unable to get rid of the clutter. This could also happen due to sensory information overload which overwhelms the jnanendriyas or because of recurrent thoughts pertaining to any issue.

As this sheath responds to external stimuli, it is inherently reactive and susceptible to fluctuations. Excessive sensory input, unresolved emotional trauma, and continuous rumination over negative thoughts or persistent identification with thought patterns, causes stress. This is well explained in Ayurveda as: 'Adhi' which we know as 'mental stress' in the modern day, When adhi remains untreated, it takes the form of 'vyadhi' which implies that they start manifesting as physical ailments with visible symptoms. This explains why people with Major Depressive Disorder start experiencing unexplained head/body aches, gut inflammation, loss of appetite and other physical disorders. As per some recent studies, even diabetes, obesity and cardiovascular diseases are caused due to chronic stress (Karthik, 2023, p. 5).

Apparently, the Annamaya Kosha is affected by Manomaya Kosha, and vice-versa, as a person is bound to be morose when their physical health is failing. However, causation of Adhi and Vyadhi could be prevented by healing the Manomaya Kosha. The Bhagavad Gita also emphasises the importance of a pure, focused mind in chapter 6 verse 5:

उद्धरेदात्मनाऽऽत्मानं नात्मानमवसादयेत्। आत्मैव ह्यात्मनो बन्धुरात्मैव रिपुरात्मनः॥6.5॥

uddhared ātmanātmānam nātmānam avasādayet ātmaiva hyātmano bandhur ātmaiva ripur
ātmanah

One should raise oneself by one's own self alone; let not one lower oneself; for the self alone is one's own friend, and the self alone is one's own enemy.

This means that the mind of a person determines their existential condition and in order to attain moksha, one has to be governed by sattva and introspection.

Such a resilient manas, unperturbed by all external circumstances, can be achieved by engaging in meditation regularly and practising mindfulness. Meditation simply means simply observing our thoughts without reacting to them. This practice alters two important brain regions which are particularly linked with depression namely, medial prefrontal cortex or the 'me center' and amygdala or the 'fear center.' Harvard Medical School says:

“These two brain regions work off each other to cause depression. The me center gets worked up reacting to stress and anxiety, and the fear center response leads to a spike in cortisol levels to fight a danger that's only in your mind. Research has found that meditation helps break the connection between these two brain regions. “When you meditate, you are better able to ignore the negative sensations of stress and anxiety, which explains, in part, why stress levels fall when you meditate, says Dr. Denninger”” (Harvard Health, 2021).

Apart from meditation, one can include mantra chanting, Svadhyaya (study of the Sastras), Satsang (company of the wise), and devotional discipline in their daily life to attain a healthy Manomaya Kosha and rid themselves of all the vyadhis caused in it.

Vijnanamaya Kosha: The Knowledge Sheath

The fourth Kosha, Vijnanamaya Kosha, comprises the Buddhi (intellect) and ahankara (ego). This sheath is responsible for discernment, decision-making, and the sense of individual agency. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* describes it in Chapter 3 Section 5 as:

विज्ञानं ब्रह्मेति व्यजानात् । विज्ञानाद्ध्येव खल्विमानि

भूतानि जायन्ते । विज्ञानेन जातानि जीवन्ति ।

विज्ञानं प्रयन्त्यभिसंविशन्तीति । तद्विज्ञाय ।

vijñānaṃ brahmeti vyajānāt . vijñānāddhyeva khalvimāni

bhūtāni jāyante . vijñānena jātāni jīvanti .

vijñānaṃ prayantyabhisamviśantīti . tadvijñāya .

Bhrgu understood that Intelligence is Brahman; because it is from Intelligence that all these living beings are born; having been born from it, they live by it and (in the end) on departing they enter into Intelligence and become one with it (Shlokam.org, n.d. 3-5).

Intellect is the rational faculty of the mind which instructs an individual to act as per their wisdom, instead of instinct. “Hunger, sleep, fear, and procreative instinct are common to man and animals. It is the Buddhi (discriminating faculty) that is special for man. A person who does not have *Buddhi* is equal to an animal. *Bhartruhari* brings out this point about how the higher faculty, the *Vijnanamaya kosha*, continuously guides the *manomaya kosha* to master the basic instincts” (Goyal, 2023).

Buddhi not only renders Viveka or discriminative ability to us, it also helps in making determinations, decisions, judgements. It also holds space for ethical discernment and lets our inner conscience speak to us. Since Ahankara also resides in this sheath, it helps in the formation and development of the sense of individuality.

This kosha is affected by our society, culture, beliefs and value systems. When this layer is clouded or imbalanced, we experience: cognitive rigidity or confusion, leading to inability to discern truth from falsehood, self-centred behaviour due to over attachment with the ego, poor moral reasoning and unethical conduct, and spiritual delusion. In order to bring back balance and

stability to vijñanamaya kosha, one should refine intellect, identify reasonably with the ego, and cultivate higher knowledge. The Bhagavad Gita states in chapter 18 verse 53:

अहङ्कारं बलं दर्पं कामं क्रोधं परिग्रहम् ।

विमुच्य निर्ममः शान्तो ब्रह्मभूयाय कल्पते ॥ १८-५३ ॥

ahankāraṁ balaṁ darpaṁ kāmam krodham parigraham

vimucya nirmamaḥ śānto brahmabhūyāya kalpate 18-53

Having abandoned egoism, power, arrogance, desire, anger and aggrandisement, and freed from the notion of mine, and so peaceful — he is fit to become BRAHMAN.

This implies that one can achieve peace only by not being swayed with the current of fluctuating emotions, desires and egotistical mindset. Such tranquility can be achieved by Svadhyaya, manana and nididhyasana i.e., by indulging in the study of Vedantic scriptures and then deeply reflecting and contemplating upon that study to train the intellect toward self-inquiry. Prathima Rayabagi and Patil (2023) also confirm this in their essay titled Contemplating the Relevance of the Theory of Pancha Kosha in the Present Era:

“Reading and understanding the concepts of Veda and Upanishad will help to increase the wisdom and in the current era, where less people go through book reading and are all into socialising, having good relations/communication with people having good knowledge and wisdom (prajnya) plays a role.”

Vedanta study is best done through satsanga, which is being in the company of like-minded spiritual seekers and a spiritual teacher. Gradually we cultivate viveka and vairagya – discernment and detachment from ephemeral identifications. With consistent practice of all these, we are able to rid ourselves of the afflictions born due to clouded intellect or ego.

Anandamaya Kosha: The Bliss Sheath

The innermost layer is called Anandamaya Kosha and is the subtlest of all. It is the innermost veil, the last layer enveloping the Atman. It is not composed with any tangible substance but with ananda – a deep, subtle, formless spiritual joy which is felt after connecting with the True Self or Atman. As the *Taittiriya Upanishad* mentions in Bhrigu Valli 3-6:

आनन्दो ब्रह्मेति व्यजानात् । आनन्दाध्येव खल्विमानि

भूतानि जायन्ते । आनन्देन जातानि जीवन्ति ।

आनन्दं प्रयन्त्यभिसंविशन्तीति ।

ānando brahmeti vyajānāt . ānandādhyeva khalvimāni

bhūtāni jāyante . ānandena jātāni jīvanti .

ānandaṁ prayantyabhisamviśantīti .

Bhrigu understood that Bliss is Brahman; because it is from Bliss that all these beings are produced and by bliss do these beings live. They go to bliss on departing and become one with it (Shlokam.org, n.d. 3-6).

However, it is easy to misidentify this sheath as the Atman or Supreme Bliss. Adi Shankaracharya explains in *Vivekacudamani* from verses 207-210 that this sheath is the modification of Avidya (Nescience) and manifests itself only as a reflection of the Atman.

आनन्दप्रतिबिम्बचुम्बिततनुर्वृत्तिस्तमोजृम्भिता

स्यादानन्दमायाः प्रियादिगुणकः स्वेष्टार्थलाभोदयः ।

पुण्यस्यानुभवे विभाति कृतिनामानन्दरूपः स्वयं

सर्वो नन्दति यत्र साधु तनुभृन्मात्रः प्रयत्नं विना ॥ २०७ ॥

Sankaracarya further warns that this sheath is not the Atman as it is conditioned, mutable, transient, and bound to past karmic impressions.

नैवायमानन्दमायाः परात्मा

सोपाधिकत्वात्प्रकृतेर्विकारात् ।

कार्यत्वहेतोः सुकृतक्रियाया

विकारसङ्घातसमाहितत्वात् ॥ २०९ ॥(ibid.)

After uncovering this last veil over the Atman by attaining right knowledge and by identifying that it is not the Self, is only when one can finally reach the True Self. He further explains that this sheath finds its fullest expression during Susupti³, when the lower sheaths recede. Though, its vestiges might still appear during jagrat or svapna states if favourable stimuli arise.

Anandamaya Kosha exhibits three qualitative states namely: Priya, Moda and Pramoda. Swami Sivananda explains these three attributes, “Priya is the happiness that arises in one from the mere sight of a desired object. Moda is the happiness which one enjoys when he is in possession of a desired object. Pramoda is the happiness which one gets from the actual enjoyment of the desired object.”

When this kosha is unbalanced, one experiences spiritual disconnection or loss of purpose. This leads to an existential void or feelings of meaninglessness. Thus one experiences chronic dissatisfaction or joylessness even in apparently positive situations. One could also begin to bypass spiritually i.e., mistaking superficial peace for absolute bliss, or could become overtly attached to meditative experiences and hinder deeper realization.

³ The Atma (soul) manifests in three states: jagrat- the waking state; svapna- the dream state, and susupti- the deep, dreamless sleep state (Majumdar, 1981).

The symptoms of a blocked Anandamaya Kosha can feed into or amplify depression also. Thus, it is important to restore balance to it which can be done through deep meditation and sadhana – consistent inward practices like yog-nidra, vipassana, or atma-vichara which helps in the dissolution of ego. Bhakti yoga, meaning, devotional practices like chanting, prayer or surrendering to the divine and, Jnana Yoga or contemplation of Vedantic texts in a Satsanga also helps. Engaging in selfless service or Seva and purifying all the lower koshas also aid in removing blockages from here.

Panchakosha Viveka Prayojanam: Usage of the Knowledge of the Pancha Koshas

As per Advaita-Vedanta, this doctrine is not to be understood only as five distinct layers in the human body which encompass the True Self but as a model that helps one in discerning the True Self which is not any of these layers. This process of discernment is called Viveka. In an explanation of Swami Vidyanaraya's seminal commentary *Panchadashi*:

Anvaya vyatirekā bhyāṁ pañcakośa vivekatah, svāt mānaṁ tata uddhṛtya param brahma
prapa dyate

By differentiating the Self from the five sheaths through the method of distinguishing between the variable and the invariable, one can draw out one's own Self from the 5 sheaths and attain the supreme Brahman.

It eventually leads to the liberation from samsara or attainment of Moksha. Thus, the exposition of this profound doctrine is not to be understood only at a superficial level, rather as a way to attain Liberation – from worldly pleasures and afflictions, to eventually let their Atma merge with the all-pervading consciousness, Brahman.

Conclusion:

The Hindu scripture, *Taittiriya Upanishad*, expounds the doctrine of Panchakosha Viveka which provides a profound understanding of the multi-layered human body. By seeing an individual as a composite of five different sheaths, health conditions could be approached very differently.

Depression, when interpreted through this lens, is not just a psychological disorder anymore as it manifests due to blockages in every kosha. It occurs as somatic fatigue, gut issues, unexplained aches in the Annamaya Kosha. In Pranamaya Kosha it is seen as disrupted vitality accompanied with shortness of breath. The seed of this disorder is found in an overwhelmed Manomaya Kosha which is burdened with constant negative thoughts and sadness. As it extends to Vijnananmaya Kosha, the person feels purposeless and faces existential crisis. However, a reason deeper than all such manifestations in the other sheaths is disconnection from the True Self, which is mirrored by the Anandamaya Kosha.

By practising Pancha Kosha Viveka, discrimination between the Self and these sheaths, a person stops misidentifying themselves with these transitory layers and realigns with the Absolute Bliss, the Atman. This happens by balancing each of the koshas individually through practices like yog asanas, pranayama, bhakti yoga, atma-chintan, svadhyaya and sadahana, dhyana and nididhyasana, and the others mentioned above. This unique model not only suggests practical ways for symptomatic healing of disorders like depression, but also paves way for one to pursue a path inward and embark on a transcendental journey. During this, all the koshas are gradually healed, their blockages removed and the person experiences True Bliss.

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