

Reframing Mental Wellbeing: A Jain Philosophical Approach within Indian Knowledge Systems

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Abstract: The increasing prevalence of mental health disorders in contemporary society necessitates a re-evaluation of dominant frameworks of mental wellbeing. Modern psychological and biomedical models, while effective in clinical contexts, often neglect the ethical and spiritual dimensions of human existence. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) offer a holistic paradigm that integrates physical, mental, ethical, and spiritual aspects of wellbeing. This paper explores the concept of mental wellbeing through the lens of Jain philosophy, a profound and systematic tradition within IKS. Drawing upon primary texts such as the *Tattvārthasūtra*, *Ācārāṅgasūtra*, and *Samayasāra*, the study analyses key concepts including karma theory, *kaṣāyas* (passions), *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), and *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness). It argues that Jain philosophy conceptualizes mental wellbeing as a state of inner purity achieved through ethical discipline, self-regulation, and detachment. The study further highlights the relevance of Jain principles in addressing contemporary challenges such as stress, anxiety, consumerism, and ethical decline. The paper concludes that integrating Jain philosophical insights into modern mental health discourse can contribute to a more sustainable and holistic model of wellbeing.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, Mental Wellbeing, Jain Philosophy, Ahiṃsā, Aparigraha, Karma Theory, Kaṣāya, Ethics

INTRODUCTION

Mental wellbeing has become a central concern in the modern world, with increasing incidences of anxiety, depression, and stress-related disorders. Contemporary mental health frameworks, largely grounded in psychology and medicine, emphasize diagnosis, treatment, and behavioural management. While these approaches have achieved significant success, they often remain limited in scope, addressing symptoms rather than underlying causes.

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) provide a holistic alternative, conceptualizing wellbeing as an integration of physical, mental, ethical, and spiritual dimensions. Within this framework, Jain philosophy offers a rigorous and structured understanding of mental processes, linking them to ethical conduct and karmic mechanisms.

Unlike modern paradigms that treat mental illness as an isolated phenomenon, Jain philosophy views mental disturbances as outcomes of karmic influx influenced by passions and unethical behaviour. This paper seeks to reinterpret mental wellbeing through Jain philosophy and demonstrate its relevance in contemporary discourse.

RESEARCH GAP

Existing literature on mental wellbeing within IKS largely focuses on Yoga and meditation. Jain philosophy, despite its rich psychological insights, remains underexplored in this domain.

OBJECTIVES

- To analyse the concept of mental wellbeing in Jain philosophy
- To examine the role of karma and passions in shaping mental states
- To explore its relevance for contemporary mental health

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly works on Jain philosophy have primarily focused on its metaphysical and ethical dimensions. Dundas (2002) presents a comprehensive account of Jain doctrine, emphasizing its ethical rigor. Jaini (1979) elaborates on the path of purification through right conduct and austerity.

Wiley (2004) discusses the philosophical and psychological aspects of Jainism, particularly the role of karma and passions. Cort (2001) highlights the lived ethical practices within Jain communities.

In contrast, modern studies on mental wellbeing have focused extensively on mindfulness and Yoga (Feuerstein, 2001; Bryant, 2009). This creates a gap where Jain philosophy's contribution to mental wellbeing remains insufficiently examined.

This paper addresses this gap by positioning Jain philosophy as a comprehensive framework for mental wellbeing.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, textual, and interpretative methodology.

Data Sources

- **Primary Texts:** *Tattvārthasūtra*, *Ācārāṅgasūtra*, *Samayasāra*
- **Secondary Sources:** Scholarly books and journal articles

MENTAL WELLBEING IN INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

Mental wellbeing in Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) is understood as a state of inner harmony, self-awareness, and spiritual balance, rather than merely the absence of psychological disorders. It is deeply rooted in the idea that the *manas* (mind), *śarīra* (body), and *ātman* (consciousness) are interconnected, and true wellbeing arises when these dimensions are in equilibrium. Unlike modern frameworks that often emphasize external factors, IKS focuses on internal transformation through self-discipline, ethical conduct, and knowledge.

A central feature of mental wellbeing in IKS is the regulation of thoughts and emotions through practices such as *dhyāna* (meditation), *svādhyāya* (self-reflection), and *vairāgya* (detachment). These practices aim to reduce mental disturbances caused by desires, attachments, and *avidyā* (ignorance). The emphasis is on cultivating qualities like *śamatva* (equanimity), *karuṇā* (compassion), and *dama* (self-control), which contribute to long-term mental stability.

Furthermore, IKS views mental disturbances not just as psychological issues but as outcomes of deeper ethical and existential imbalances. Therefore, mental wellbeing is achieved through aligning one's life with universal principles such as *dharma*, non-violence, and truthfulness. This holistic perspective offers a sustainable and integrative model of mental health, highly relevant in addressing the complexities of modern life.

Jain Philosophy: Foundations of Mental Wellbeing

Jain philosophy presents a highly sophisticated and integrative framework for understanding mental wellbeing, grounded in its metaphysical, ethical, and psychological doctrines. Unlike modern psychological paradigms that often isolate mental health as a clinical or cognitive phenomenon, Jain thought situates mental wellbeing within a broader ontological and moral universe. It posits that mental states are not merely neuropsychological events but are intrinsically connected to the condition of the *jīva* (soul), its karmic entanglements, and the ethical quality of one's conduct. This integrated perspective enables a more comprehensive

understanding of mental wellbeing as a process of inner purification, ethical alignment, and spiritual awakening.

At the metaphysical level, Jain philosophy asserts that the soul is inherently pure, characterized by infinite knowledge, perception, bliss, and energy. However, this intrinsic purity is obscured by karmic matter that binds to the soul as a result of actions motivated by ignorance and passions. The *Tattvārthasūtra* succinctly articulates the path to liberation:

सम्यग्दर्शनज्ञानचारित्राणिमोक्षमार्गः॥(Tattvārthasūtra 1.1)

This formulation of the *Ratnatraya* (Three Jewels) is not merely a spiritual prescription but also a psychological framework. *Samyag-darśana* (Right faith) corrects cognitive distortions by aligning perception with reality; *samyag-jñāna* (right knowledge) ensures epistemic clarity; and *samyag-cāritra* (right conduct) regulates behaviour in accordance with ethical principles. Together, these dimensions function as a comprehensive model of cognitive, affective, and behavioural integration, which is central to mental wellbeing.

A critical contribution of Jain philosophy to the discourse on mental wellbeing lies in its theory of karma, which provides a unique explanatory model for psychological states. Karma is conceptualized as a form of subtle materiality that attaches to the soul and influences its cognitive and emotional functions. This stands in contrast to modern psychological theories that explain mental states primarily through neurobiological or environmental factors. In Jain thought, mental disturbances such as anxiety, anger, and restlessness are not merely symptoms but manifestations of deeper karmic processes. This perspective shifts the focus from symptomatic treatment to root-cause analysis, emphasizing ethical transformation as a means of achieving mental health.

The role of *kaṣāyas* (passions)— *krodha* (anger), *māna* (pride), *māyā* (deceit), and *lobha* (greed)—is particularly significant in this context. These passions are identified as the primary causes of karmic *āsrava* (influx) and *bandha* (bondage), and consequently, as the root causes of mental disturbance. Jain texts assert:

क्रोधमानमायालोभाःकषायाः(Gommatasara, Jīvakāṇḍa, verse 143)

From a psychological perspective, these passions can be interpreted as maladaptive emotional states that disrupt cognitive clarity and emotional equilibrium. Anger leads to impulsivity and

loss of rational control, while greed generates chronic dissatisfaction and anxiety. By identifying these passions as central obstacles to wellbeing, Jain philosophy anticipates modern theories of emotional regulation. However, it extends these insights by embedding them within an ethical and spiritual framework, thereby offering a more holistic approach.

Ethical principles such as *ahimsā* (non-violence) and *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness) serve as practical mechanisms for regulating these passions. *Ahimsā*, understood in its comprehensive sense, includes non-violence in thought, speech, and action. It reduces hostility and fosters compassion, thereby promoting emotional stability. *Aparigraha* addresses the psychological roots of attachment and desire, which are major sources of stress and anxiety. By advocating restraint and detachment, it promotes contentment and reduces mental agitation.

The ethical framework of Jainism is further reinforced by the concept of *saṃyama* (self-discipline), which plays an important role in mental regulation. Jain philosophy emphasizes internal regulation over external intervention. This is operationalized through practices such as *sāmāyika* (equanimity), *pratikramaṇa* (self-reflection), and *dhyāna* (meditation). These practices cultivate awareness, reduce emotional reactivity, and enhance cognitive clarity. They function as systematic tools for introspection and psychological transformation.

From a critical standpoint, one of the most significant contributions of Jain philosophy to the concept of mental wellbeing is its emphasis on ethical causality. While modern psychology acknowledges the role of behaviour and environment, it often lacks a robust ethical framework linking actions to long-term mental consequences. Jain philosophy addresses this gap by positing a direct relationship between ethical conduct and mental states, mediated through karma. This introduces a normative dimension to mental health, suggesting that wellbeing is not merely psychological adjustment but also moral responsibility.

However, this framework also invites critical reflection. The strong emphasis on asceticism and detachment may appear difficult to implement in contemporary life, particularly in socially and economically engaged contexts. The ideal of complete renunciation may not be practical for all individuals. Nevertheless, the underlying principles—moderation, self-awareness, and ethical living—are adaptable and can be integrated into modern lifestyles without requiring full ascetic commitment.

Furthermore, when compared with modern therapeutic approaches such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and mindfulness-based interventions, Jain philosophy demonstrates notable conceptual parallels. The identification of passions resembles the CBT framework of cognitive distortions, while meditative practices align with mindfulness techniques. However, Jain philosophy extends beyond these by integrating ethical and spiritual dimensions, thereby offering a more comprehensive model of mental wellbeing.

- **Nature of Soul**

उपयोगलक्षणोजीवः (Tattvārthasūtra 2.8)

The soul is characterized by consciousness.

In Jain philosophy, the *jīva*(soul) is regarded as an eternal, conscious, and independent substance characterized by *upayoga*(awareness). It inherently possesses *ananta-jñāna*(infinite knowledge), *ananta-darśana*(perception), *ananta-sukha*(bliss), and *ananta-vīrya*(energy). However, these qualities remain obscured due to the accumulation of karmic matter. The soul is formless yet coextensive with the body it occupies, adapting to its dimensions. Its essential nature is purity and self-luminosity, but attachment and passions lead to bondage. Liberation is achieved when the soul is freed from karmic impurities, allowing its true qualities to manifest fully and establishing a state of perfect mental and spiritual wellbeing.

- **Karma Theory**

आस्रवोबन्धहेतुः (Tattvārthasūtra 6.1)

Karmic influx is the cause of bondage.

Mental disturbances arise due to karmic accumulation caused by unethical actions and passions. In Jain philosophy, karma is conceived not merely as a moral law but as a *karma pudgala*(subtle material substance) that binds to the *jīva*(soul) due to actions driven by *kaṣāyas*(passions) such as anger, pride, deceit, and greed. This bondage occurs through processes known as *āsrava* (influx of karma) and *bandha* (binding of karma). Every thought, word, and action contribute to the accumulation of karma, which influences one's mental states, experiences, and future existence.

Karma directly affects mental wellbeing by generating disturbances such as anxiety, attachment, and suffering. The *saṃvara*(cessation) and *nirjarā*(shedding) of karma through

ethical conduct, self-discipline, and meditation lead to purification of the soul. Ultimately, complete freedom from karma results in liberation, characterized by perfect knowledge, peace, and bliss.

- **Kaṣāyas (Passions)**

क्रोधमानमायालोभाःकषायाः(Gommatasara, Jīvakāṇḍa, verse 143)

The four passions—anger, pride, deceit, and greed—are primary causes of mental imbalance.

In Jain philosophy, *kaṣāyas* (passions) are the primary psychological and ethical factors that disturb the purity of the soul and lead to karmic bondage. The four principal *kaṣāyas* are *krodha*(anger), *māna*(pride), *māyā*(deceit), and *lobha*(greed). These passions arise from ignorance and attachment, influencing thoughts, emotions, and actions, thereby causing mental agitation and imbalance.

Kaṣāyas play an important role in the process of *āsrava* (influx of karma) and *bandha* (bondage), as they intensify the accumulation of karmic matter. From a psychological perspective, they correspond to negative emotional states such as hostility, egoism, manipulation, and excessive desire. Jain philosophy emphasizes their control and eradication through ethical discipline, self-awareness, and meditation. The reduction of *kaṣāyas* leads to mental clarity, emotional stability, and ultimately contributes to spiritual *mokṣa*(liberation).

ETHICAL FRAMEWORK AND MENTAL WELLBEING

In Jain philosophy *Ahiṃsā*, *Satya*, *Asteya*, *Aparigraha* are main principles.

- **Ahiṃsā**- Non-violence promotes compassion and reduces internal conflict.

In Jain philosophy, *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) is the highest ethical principle and the foundation of mental and spiritual wellbeing. It extends beyond physical non-injury to include non-violence in thought, speech, and intention. Harmful emotions such as anger, hatred, and jealousy are considered forms of internal violence that disturb mental peace and attract karmic bondage. By practicing *ahiṃsā*, an individual cultivates compassion, empathy, and emotional balance. This reduces inner conflict and promotes harmony with all living beings.

- **Satya-** Satya promotes integrity and trust.

In Jain philosophy, *satya* (truthfulness) is a fundamental ethical principle that emphasizes speaking and adhering to truth in thought, word, and action. It is not merely factual correctness but truth expressed with *ahimsā* (non-violence) and responsibility, ensuring that speech does not harm others. Falsehood, exaggeration, or deceit disturbs mental clarity and leads to karmic bondage.

Practicing *satya* promotes integrity, trust, and inner coherence, reducing cognitive dissonance and emotional conflict. It fosters clarity of mind, self-discipline, and ethical awareness. Thus, *satya* functions as both a moral virtue and a psychological tool, contributing significantly to mental stability and overall wellbeing.

- **Asteya (Non-stealing)**

In Jain philosophy, *asteya* (non-stealing) refers to abstaining from taking anything that is not willingly given. It extends beyond physical theft to include subtle forms such as exploitation, dishonesty, or misuse of resources. *Asteya* promotes fairness, respect for others' rights, and ethical responsibility.

Psychologically, the desire to possess what belongs to others arises from greed and insecurity, leading to restlessness and dissatisfaction. By practicing *asteya*, individuals cultivate contentment, integrity, and self-control. It reduces mental agitation caused by comparison and craving, thereby fostering inner peace. Thus, *asteya* contributes to both ethical living and mental wellbeing by aligning actions with honesty and contentment.

- **Aparigraha-** Non-possession reduces attachment and anxiety, fostering mental stability.

In Jain philosophy, *aparigraha* (non-possession) refers to non-possessiveness or non-attachment to material objects, relationships, and even thoughts. It is a key ethical principle that addresses the root causes of mental distress—desire, attachment, and insecurity. Excessive accumulation and craving lead to anxiety, fear of loss, and dissatisfaction. *Aparigraha* encourages limiting possessions and cultivating detachment, thereby promoting *santoṣa* (contentment) and inner peace. Psychologically, it reduces stress, comparison, and greed, fostering emotional stability and clarity. By practicing *aparigraha*, individuals free

themselves from mental attachment, leading to a balanced mind and contributing significantly to holistic mental wellbeing.

PRACTICES FOR MENTAL WELLBEING

- **Pratikramana** - Encourages self-reflection

In Jain philosophy, *pratikramaṇa* is a vital spiritual and psychological practice involving self-reflection, repentance, and ethical introspection. It literally means “returning back” or revisiting one’s actions, thoughts, and intentions to identify and correct faults. Through this practice, individuals acknowledge harmful deeds, seek forgiveness, and resolve to avoid repeating them.

Pratikramaṇa functions as a powerful tool for mental purification, reducing guilt, anxiety, and emotional burden. It promotes awareness, accountability, and moral discipline, thereby enhancing inner clarity and peace. Regular practice helps in controlling *kaṣāyas*(passions) and preventing karmic accumulation, contributing significantly to sustained mental wellbeing.

- **Dhyāna**- Enhances concentration and inner peace

These practices function as tools for emotional regulation and mental clarity. Jain philosophy offers both preventive and corrective models of mental wellbeing. In Jain philosophy, *dhyāna* is a central practice for achieving mental purification and spiritual advancement. It involves sustained concentration and awareness directed inward, enabling the practitioner to observe and control thoughts and emotions. Jain texts classify *dhyāna* into different types, distinguishing between auspicious and inauspicious meditation, with the former leading to spiritual progress and mental stability.

Dhyāna helps in reducing mental fluctuations, calming *kaṣāyas*(passions), and preventing the influx of karma. It cultivates qualities such as equanimity, self-awareness, and detachment. Psychologically, it enhances focus, reduces stress, and promotes emotional balance. Ultimately, *dhyāna* leads to a state of inner peace and plays an important role in attaining *mokṣa*(liberation).

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

- **Stress Reduction:**

Aparigraha minimizes material anxiety. In the contemporary world, stress has become a pervasive challenge due to rapid urbanization, technological overload, and competitive lifestyles. Jain philosophy offers valuable insights for stress reduction through its ethical and psychological principles. The practice of *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness) helps individuals reduce material desires and the pressure of constant acquisition, which is a major source of stress. Similarly, *ahimsā* (non-violence), when applied at the level of thought, minimizes anger and internal conflict, promoting emotional calmness.

Practices such as *dhyāna* (meditation) and *pratikramaṇa* (self-reflection) function as effective tools for managing stress by fostering mindfulness, self-awareness, and emotional regulation. By encouraging detachment, discipline, and inner balance, Jain philosophy provides a sustainable and holistic approach to stress reduction, highly relevant in addressing modern mental health concerns.

- **Emotional Control:**

Ahimsā reduces anger. In the modern context, emotional instability—manifested as anger, anxiety, frustration, and impulsive behaviour—has become a significant challenge. Jain philosophy provides a structured approach to emotional control through the regulation of *kaṣāyas* (passions) such as *krodha*(anger), *māna*(pride), *māyā*(deceit), and *lobha*(greed). These are identified as the root causes of emotional disturbance and mental imbalance.

Practices like *dhyāna* (meditation) cultivate awareness and help individuals observe emotions without reacting impulsively. Similarly, *pratikramaṇa* (self-reflection) encourages introspection and correction of negative tendencies. The principle of *ahimsā* (non-violence) further promotes emotional restraint by reducing hostility and fostering compassion.

Thus, Jain philosophy emphasizes self-regulation, awareness, and ethical discipline as means to achieve emotional stability, making it highly relevant for managing emotional challenges in contemporary life.

- **Sustainability:**

Jain ethics promote minimalism. In the context of growing environmental crises and unsustainable consumption patterns, Jain philosophy offers a powerful framework for sustainability through the principle of *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness). It advocates limiting one's material needs and avoiding excessive accumulation, thereby promoting a minimalist lifestyle. This restraint not only reduces ecological impact but also addresses psychological stress arising from consumerism and competition.

Jain ethics emphasize living in harmony with all forms of life, guided by *ahimsā* (non-violence), which extends to environmental responsibility and respect for nature. By encouraging conscious consumption, self-discipline, and detachment, Jain philosophy fosters both ecological balance and inner wellbeing. Thus, its principles align closely with modern sustainability movements, offering a timeless and ethically grounded model for minimalism and responsible living.

- **Digital Discipline:**

Self-control improves focus. In the digital age, excessive use of technology and constant exposure to information have led to distraction, anxiety, and reduced attention span. Jain philosophy offers valuable insights for cultivating digital discipline through principles of self-restraint and mindfulness. The concept of *samyama* (self-control) encourages regulation of sensory inputs, which can be applied to limiting screen time and digital consumption.

Practices such as *dhyāna* (meditation) enhance focus and awareness, helping individuals disengage from compulsive digital habits. Similarly, *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness) can be extended to reduce dependence on digital devices and virtual validation. By fostering detachment, intentional use, and inner awareness, Jain philosophy provides a meaningful framework for managing digital overload and maintaining mental clarity in the modern technological environment.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Jain philosophy offers a profound and holistic framework for understanding mental wellbeing within the broader context of Indian Knowledge Systems. Unlike modern approaches that often focus on symptomatic treatment, Jain philosophy emphasizes the root causes of mental disturbance, particularly karmic accumulation and the

kaṣāyas(influence of passions). By integrating metaphysical insight, ethical discipline, and psychological practices, it presents mental wellbeing as a state of inner purity, self-awareness, and emotional balance.

Core principles such as *ahimsā*, *satya*, *asteya*, and *aparigraha* provide practical guidelines for regulating thoughts, emotions, and behaviour. Similarly, practices like *dhyāna* and *pratikramaṇa* function as effective tools for self-reflection, emotional control, and mental clarity. These elements collectively contribute to a sustainable and preventive model of mental health.

In the contemporary context, marked by stress, consumerism, and digital overload, Jain philosophy offers timeless solutions grounded in self-discipline and ethical living. Its emphasis on moderation, non-attachment, and compassion aligns closely with modern concerns for mental health and sustainability. Thus, reframing mental wellbeing through Jain philosophy not only enriches academic discourse but also provides practical insights for achieving a balanced and meaningful life.

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