

# THE ROLE OF YOGA IN CULTIVATING METACOGNITIVE BELIEFS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY: A THEORETICAL INTEGRATION OF WELLS' METACOGNITIVE MODEL AND PATANJALI'S ASHTANGA YOGA

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**Abstract:** This paper combines the Wells Metacognitive Model with the Ashtanga Yoga of Patanjali. Research examines the utility of various yoga techniques for altering metacognition practices. There is growing interest in using yoga as an intervention to improve people's health. We do not know much about the cognitive effects of yoga. The eight limbs or steps of Patanjali offer profound benefits of Yoga. Practices like *Pratyahara*, *Dharana*, *Dhyana*, and *Samadhi* can be useful in controlling one's metacognitions, according to Psychologists. Beliefs are called metacognitive thoughts. Yoga therapy can be analyzed using the Wells metacognitive model and acceptance and commitment therapy. Yoga acts as a catalyst for changing disturbing metacognitions, such as worry stopping, mindful being, and committed action. The two concepts also contain analogous ideas. It presents several hypotheses for analysis. Additionally, it reviews psychotherapy and research ramifications.

**IndexTerms-** *Metacognition, Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga, Wells' Metacognitive Model, Mindfulness, Yoga, Psychological Flexibility, Cognitive Attentional Syndrome, ACT*

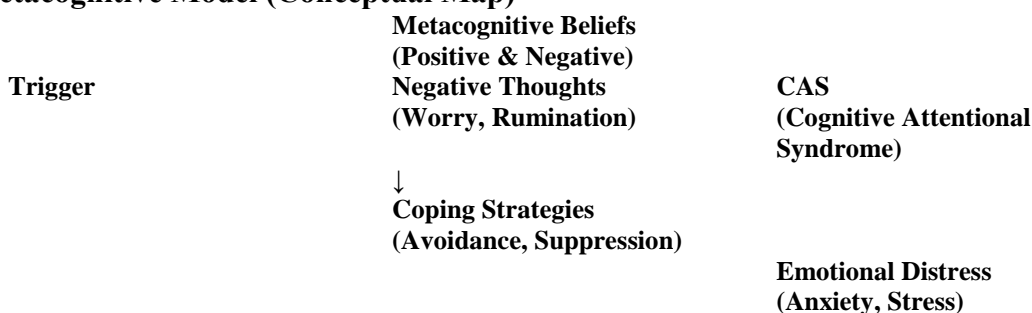
## INTRODUCTION

Thinking about our own thinking is a powerful tool that helps us understand how our minds work and how we feel. This process, called metacognition, is essential for dealing with problems, managing our emotions, and recovering from difficult times. When we can observe, evaluate, and control our thoughts, we're better equipped to handle life's challenges. Metacognition plays a crucial role in this process. However, when it malfunctions, it can lead to significant issues. For instance, having distorted ideas about our own thinking can contribute to various mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and post-traumatic stress. Research has shown that metacognition and its associated problems are closely linked to these issues, as highlighted in studies by. (Seow et al., 2025; Sun et al., 2017) By recognizing the importance of metacognition, we can take steps to develop this skill and improve our overall well-being. Yoga is an ancient Indian practice used to support the mind and body. It has been getting attention from scientists because they think it can help people with mental health problems. Yoga started with a man named Patanjali, who wrote about it in his Yoga Sutras around 400 years after Jesus was born. The practice of Yoga includes performing special poses, controlling your breathing, and meditating to help you feel more aware and calmer. Yoga can also help people feel better when they are anxious or depressed. People have conducted studies showing that Yoga is good for you. They do not really understand how it works. Yoga is still really helpful for people who want to feel, which is why people keep practicing it.(Bennetts, 2022; Büssing et al., 2012)

This paper seeks to fill a gap by combining two ideas: the Wells Metacognitive Model and Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga. We think that some parts of Ashtanga Yoga can help people change their beliefs and become more psychologically flexible, which is a big part of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Wells' Metacognitive Model and Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga can work together to help people understand how yoga can improve their emotional and cognitive well-being. By examining how these two ideas are similar, we aim to show how yoga can significantly enhance people's cognitive and emotional well-being, and how the Wells Metacognitive Model and Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga are connected to this.

## Theoretical Background

### Wells' Metacognitive Model (Conceptual Map)



Adrian Wells Metacognitive Model says that people get upset because of the way they think, not because of what they think about. This model is based on the idea that people have habits when it comes to thinking and paying attention. The Cognitive Attentional Syndrome is a part of this model. It is when people think about things a lot and cannot stop that they always look out for bad things that might happen, and they do things that do not help them deal with their problems. (Adrian Wells - Google Scholar, n.d.; Conboy et al., 2021) The model discusses two kinds of thoughts people have about their thinking. There are thoughts about thinking, like when people think that worrying helps them get ready for bad things that might happen. Then there are thoughts about thinking, like when people think they cannot control their thoughts. Both kinds of thoughts make people feel bad and keep them from feeling better. (Conboy et al., 2021)

Metacognitive therapy is a way to help people that is based on Adrian Wells' Metacognitive Model. It tries to change the way people think about their thoughts. Some of the things that therapists do to help people include teaching them how to pay attention in a way that allows them to be aware of their thoughts without getting caught up in them, and how to think about things in a new way. These things are similar to things that people do when they practice yoga. (Brenes et al., 2021)

### Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga: The Eight-Limbed Framework

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras explain Ashtanga Yoga as a step-by-step way to achieve liberation through controlled body, mind, and moral practices. The eight steps are: (Alam et al., 2024)

Yama	Niyama	Asana	Pranayama	Pratyahara	Dharana	Dhyana	Samadhi
Controlling your behaviour towards others	Habits to follow	Physical exercises	Breathing exercises	Withdrawing from your senses	Focusing your attention	Meditation	A state of awareness

The last four steps. *Samyama*. Help you focus inward more and more.

**Pratyahara** is about stopping your senses from reacting.

**Dharana** helps you concentrate on one thing.

**Dhyana** makes this concentration steady and continuous.

**Samadhi** is a state where you're completely aware, without thinking.

These practices help you control your attention, reduce reactions, and observe yourself calmly. They match some ideas in the theory of metacognition.

### Psychological Flexibility and ACT

Psychological flexibility is about being able to live in the moment. This means we can deal with things as they are without trying to defend ourselves or push things away. We can also decide to change our behaviour

or keep doing what we are doing based on what's really important to us. Six things help us be psychologically flexible:(Rutschmann et al., 2024; *The Six Core Processes of ACT / Association for Contextual Behavioral Science*, n.d.)

Accepting things as they are	Not getting caught up in our thoughts	Being aware of what's happening right now	Understanding that we are more than our thoughts	Figuring out what is truly important to us	Taking action based on what we want.
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Psychological inflexibility is the opposite of this. It is when we get stuck in our thoughts and feelings, unable to stop thinking about the past or worrying about the future. This is similar to something called the CAS in Wells' model. The main idea is that when we get too caught up in our thoughts and feelings, it can cause us a lot of pain. Psychological flexibility and psychological inflexibility are related to this idea. They both say that getting too stuck on our thoughts is what causes problems.

### Theoretical Integration: Mapping Ashtanga Yoga onto Metacognitive Constructs *Yama, Niyama, and Metacognitive Regulation*

The parts of Yoga that address what's right and wrong, such as *Yama* and *Niyama*, help people reflect on their actions. *Yama* signifies being a good human. It is happiness, not just yourself, but of others as well. Being kind to others is helpful. This means to always tell the truth. We need to speak the truth, even if it's hard. It refers to controlling one's own body and mind. It means not to be greedy. When you take away someone's things without their permission, it is stealing. Thou shalt not steal. *Niyama* refers to the observances one must fulfil for oneself, while *yama* refers to the moral restraints in yoga. Staying clean is all that matters. Being content and satisfied with life. Having inner strength is all one needs. On the mental aspect as well, it involves understanding more about yourself. Forgiveness is the essence. Let these things go if you want to move on. Letting go of hurt and anger gets easier when you practice it. We ought to let go of those who apologize. According to *Niyama*, self-reflection, or Svadhyaya, is a really important meditation practice. To be self-aware, one must pay attention to one's feelings and thoughts. It is like watching your own mind. *Yama* and *Niyama* make it easier for people to interact socially and do productive activities. This will help you think more clearly! People blissfully become happy in whatever they do, whether it is yoga. They don't worry about things while doing it. Yoga helps produce clarity of mind and calmness of spirit. When one worries less, they get less anxious.(Tolbaños-Roche & Menon, 2021; van Aalst et al., 2020)

### *Asana and Interoceptive Metacognitive Awareness*

Physical postures, or *Asana*, help people become more aware of their body's state. This awareness is important for monitoring one's thoughts and feelings.(Nayan Rishi, 2024)

It helps people pay attention to their body sensations.

When people practice *Asana*, they focus on their sensations for extended periods. This helps them stop thinking about themselves in certain ways.

They become more aware of their body in the moment.

This is similar to a strategy called attention training.

It helps people stop focusing on their worries.

Doing physical postures also helps people get used to feeling uncomfortable. They learn that uncomfortable feelings do not last forever. They can handle them.

This helps people change their thoughts about not being able to control their feelings.

The practice of *Asana* helps people develop a positive and accepting attitude towards their internal states. It also helps people deal with their feelings in a way.

### *Pranayama and Cognitive Attentional Syndrome Reduction*

These *Pranayama* techniques really do affect the nervous system. They help to calm it down and reduce stress. They also help strengthen the parasympathetic tone. When we think about it, *Pranayama* techniques help to regulate our bodies. This can change the way our mind and body work together. *Pranayama* is about paying attention to your breath. You have to keep watching your breath without getting caught up in your thoughts. This is like what Wells called "detached mindfulness". It means you see your thoughts and feelings as things that come and go. You do not get too caught up in them. You observe them without thinking much about them. This is what *Pranayama* techniques are about. (Brown & Gerbarg, 2009)

### ***Pratyahara and Cognitive Diffusion***

**Pratyahara** is deliberately stopping your attention from wandering. This helps you to see what your mind is doing. You can watch your thoughts and feelings without reacting to them. **Pratyahara** is a defusion technique used in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). It helps you see your thoughts for what they are - just thoughts, not reality. This concept is also connected to the Cognitive Attentional Syndrome (CAS), as described by Wells. When you're constantly on the lookout for potential dangers, your focus shifts inward. You start paying attention to your internal experiences rather than reacting to external events. By practicing this non-reactive approach, you can train yourself to stop giving attention to things that might trigger fear or anxiety. Over time, this can lead to a significant reduction in anxiety levels. Essentially, **Pratyahara** teaches you to modify your attention patterns, so you're not always preoccupied with worst-case scenarios. You learn to focus on the present moment, rather than getting caught up in worries about the future. This can be a really powerful tool for managing anxiety and improving your overall well-being. By changing how you pay attention, you can break free from the cycle of constant worry and fear and develop a more mindful, accepting approach to life. (*The Cognitive Role of Yantras in Yogic Stages of Pranayama and Pratyahara: A Systematic Review Using Prisma* » *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*, n.d.)

### ***Dharana, Dhyana, and Metacognitive Monitoring***

**Dharana**, which is concentration, and **Dhyana**, which is meditation, are the main parts of the Ashtanga way of thinking. These practices are about keeping your attention focused on one thing, like your breath or a mantra, and being aware of your thoughts without judging them. When your mind starts to wander, you do not try to stop it or think about it; you notice it. Go back to what you were focusing on. (Telles et al., 2016) This helps with the bad thoughts you have about your own thinking. It shows you that you do not have to worry about your worries and that your thoughts are just thoughts that come and go. **Dhyana** is a form of meditation in which you keep your attention focused without stopping. It helps you develop what Wells calls awareness, which means you can watch your thoughts from a distance, as if you were observing them from the outside. **Dharana** and **Dhyana**, these two practices help you understand your thoughts and your mind better.

### ***Samadhi and Self-As-Context***

**Samadhi** is the last step on the Ashtanga path, and it's a really special state of awareness. When you're in this state, you don't see a difference between yourself and the things around you. It's like your sense of self just melts away. This state is beyond how our minds usually work, but it's super important for understanding what's going on in your own head. According to Yamashiro, who wrote about this in 2015, reaching this state can be a total game-changer for understanding your own thoughts and feelings. (Yamashiro, 2015)

**Samadhi** can be thought of as the understanding of 'self-as-context,' the experience of a steady, ongoing perspective that is not defined by your thoughts, emotions, or feelings. This insight fundamentally changes how you think about yourself. If your identity does not depend on dealing with thoughts, you do not need to keep thinking about or worrying about them. The practitioner no longer sees thoughts as intrusions that need to be managed. As things that come and go within a big field of awareness. The foundation of thoughts about thinking gets completely undermined. When thoughts are no longer a threat, the drive to ruminate and worry fades away. (Samadhi, Enlightenment, Situationism, and Developing the Center. (*Samadhi, Enlightenment, Situationism, and Developing the Center | Chintamani Yoga*, n.d.) You start to see thoughts as phenomena, not as threats that need your attention. This new perspective helps you handle thoughts in a way. **Samadhi** is about realizing that you are not your thoughts; you are the one who observes them. This realization can bring a lot of peace and clarity to your mind.

### **Proposed Conceptual Model**

Based on what we have discussed so far, here is a model that shows how Ashtanga Yoga helps people become more flexible in their thinking. (Pandey & Dagar, 2022)

The model has three parts:

Phase 1 – Foundation ( <b>Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama</b> ): When people do Ashtanga Yoga, they learn to be more disciplined and focused. This helps them let go of thoughts and become more aware of their bodies.
This is important because it helps people get ready for advanced work on their thoughts and feelings.
Phase 2 – Metacognitive Restructuring ( <b>Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana</b> ): As people practice Ashtanga Yoga, they learn to pay attention in a way.
This helps them avoid getting caught up in their thoughts and feelings and stay more aware of the moment.

Ashtanga Yoga helps people change their thoughts about themselves and the world.

Phase 3 – Integration and Flexibility (**Samadhi** as orientation): When people get really good at Ashtanga Yoga, they start to understand themselves

This helps them figure out what's important to them and take action. Ashtanga Yoga helps people become more flexible in their thinking, enabling them to handle life's situations. (Fox et al., 2024)

This model also gives us some ideas to test:

1. *People who practice Ashtanga Yoga regularly will have strong thoughts about themselves and the world.*
2. *The changes that happen when people practice Ashtanga Yoga will help them become more flexible in their thinking.*
3. *People who are really good at Ashtanga Yoga (Dhyana/Samadhi stages) will be more aware of their thoughts and feelings. Have lower CAS scores than people who are just starting.*

We can test these ideas to see if Ashtanga Yoga really helps people become more flexible in their thinking. The Ashtanga Yoga model and the metacognitive pathway can help us understand how Ashtanga Yoga works. Ashtanga Yoga is a way to help people become more flexible in their thinking, and our model shows how it can do that.

## IMPLICATIONS

### *Clinical Implications*

The notion of combining elements of the interventions suggests we could use Y-MCT to help people. Y-MCT can support individuals in overcoming challenges using techniques from MCT and Ashtanga Yoga. We can help anxious people do some breathing exercises, like **Pranayama**, and other techniques, like **Pratyahara**. Practicing mindfulness is a fantastic way of showing up with everything else without getting too absorbed in your thoughts. It's the same in the circus. This idea also suggests that Yoga-informed Metacognitive Therapy (Y-MCT) could help individuals who have little success discussing their challenges. Y-MCT uses yoga to help people overcome experiences that affect their minds or bodies. Trauma victims or individuals unaware of their mental health problems may benefit from Y-MCT therapy. (Khalsa et al., 2014)

### *Research Implications*

An investigation into metacognition by researchers should be conducted within the context of **Pranayama** and **Dhyana** Yogic practices. A good approach to measuring their metacognition is to use the Metacognitions Questionnaire-30. They ought to find out whether changes in metacognitions are responsible for the impact of yoga on anxiety and depression. Scientists should use dedicated circuits to monitor the brain and determine the statistics of yoga. The relationship between yoga and the brain must be fully understood with regard to how yoga might change or modulate the functioning of the default mode network, the prefrontal cortex, and cognition.

We should follow people who practice Ashtanga Yoga for a time and see how they change. We can compare them to people who don't practice yoga to see what really makes a difference. This will help us understand how much yoga we need to make real changes in our thoughts and feelings. We can also see how people's thoughts and feelings change as they get better at yoga. (Kinser et al., 2012; Patra et al., 2020)

### *Educational Implications*

The idea of using yoga in schools is one. It can help students learn better. Yoga can help students think about their thinking. This is called skills.

Yoga can help students pay attention and think clearly. It can also help them be more flexible in their thinking. Yoga programs that focus on these skills can be very helpful. They can help students learn and regulate their learning. Yoga is a way to do this. Yoga practice can help students develop skills. This is a goal for students to achieve. (Martin et al., 2024)

## Limitations and Future Directions

This paper is about ideas. It has some limitations because it is just a concept. The idea I am presenting needs to be tested with people, and it should not be used instead of what doctors normally do. Some things I talk about in this paper, like Samadhi, are hard to measure in a way that psychologists can understand, so we need to be creative and humble when we try to apply this to life. The thing about Ashtanga Yoga is that it's not just one way of doing things - there are lots of different approaches and ideas out there. So, trying to pin down

one simple explanation for how it all works is pretty tough. If people want to really understand Ashtanga Yoga in the future, they should probably take a closer look at how practitioners actually practice and figure out what works best. That way, we can get a better sense of what's really going on and how to make the most of this tradition. It's not just about reading books or listening to theories - it's about seeing what actually happens when people practice Ashtanga Yoga.

We also need to make sure that what I am saying is true for people from different cultures, because the ideas I am using were mostly developed through studies of people from Western countries. We need to do research to see if this idea works for people who practice yoga in different parts of the world.

## Conclusion

Why do we misinterpret each other so often? According to them, why should we use our own logic and force to make others feel different from what we think? What makes the human mind so complex? If you have ever thought of these types of questions or more, I have something for you. Let's delve into Metacognition. Our mind possesses many mechanisms that control our thought process. If we can identify and harness these mechanisms, we can change the way we think and process events. Now, the question is how to learn about these mechanisms. This is how the Wells Metacognitive Model enters the picture. The Wells Metacognitive Model can allow an understanding of these processes. This is not the only way to change the way we think and feel about ourselves. Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga is another vital component that aids the journey. By integrating the Wells Metacognitive Model and Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga, we can transform what we think and feel about ourselves.

The 8 limbs of Ashtanga Yoga help us be cognitively flexible. Cognitive flexibility is of great significance to us. Ancient knowledge of yoga enlightens us about our mind. We genuinely hope that this inspiration can help others reflect further, assist doctors and therapists in treating patients more holistically, and promote a much-needed East-West dialogue on the mind. In the end, we believe this synthesis will allow us to better understand the mind, and we look forward to this development.

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