



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Evaluating mental well-being and environmental sustainability in Indian stories

Alka Ranjan

Abstract

The article examines mental well-being and environmental sustainability as found in Indian stories. Mental well-being is holistic and encompasses psychological, emotional, and social health. Indian Psychology adds spirituality to this holistic realm and widens the concept. Environmental sustainability is a determinant of mental well-being and a sustainable development goal. Effective steps must be taken to preserve the environment for future generations. A sample of Jātaka tales is examined to explore how mental well-being and environmental sustainability are understood in the Indian literature. The method of content and thematic analysis is used for the purpose. The superordinate themes identified are the characteristics of lower and higher mental well-being, consequences of lower mental well-being, techniques to attain higher mental well-being, features of environmental sustainability, and indigenous steps in achieving it. The findings emphasize the significance of following dharma in our day-to-day life and identify the Indian traditional ways of maintaining and enhancing mental well-being. It identifies the features of environmental sustainability that can be an inherent part of the lifestyle and highlights the indigenous methods that can be adopted to promote the sustainability of the environment. These findings will contribute significantly to increasing awareness and changing the lifestyle of the Indian community. It also shows that the methods found in the Indian philosophical texts and literature can effectively attain sustainable development goals.

Keywords: mental well-being, environment, sustainability, Jātaka tales, thematic analysis, content analysis

Introduction

The World Health Organization (2004) has defined mental health as “a state of well-being that helps a person function optimally, realize their ability, cope effectively with stress, and contribute meaningfully to the community.” Thus, well-being is an inherent component of mental health. Mental well-being is a positive state of emotional, psychological, and social health (Gautum *et al.*, 2024). Well-being is further divided into hedonic well-being, which focuses on emotional wellness and eudaimonic well-being, which emphasizes an individual’s positive and optimal functioning.

The Indian conception of well-being goes beyond the emotional and behavioral components and emphasizes consciousness. Taittiriya Upanishad explains this through the Kosha theory (Vikaspedia, 2025). The theory states that five sheaths or koshas cover the consciousness. The outermost fifth layer is composed of food and comprises a person’s physical being. The fourth layer is the vital force and the third layer comprises the mental functions of an individual. The second layer is the intuitive ability of a person. The first and the innermost layer is the ultimate bliss or Ananda.

According to the Indian philosophical texts, most people function from the third, fourth, and fifth layers, i.e., they are mostly occupied with meeting their biological, emotional, and psychological needs (Raina, 2016). As a result, most people are unable to experience the ultimate bliss.

The Indian philosophical texts outline methods to experience ultimate bliss and attain consciousness. One method is to practice the Purushartha, which has four goals (Mittal & Thursby, 2004). The four goals are *dharma* (values), *Artha* (wealth), *kāma* (desires) and *moksha* (liberation). The sages have upheld the pursuit of Artha and Kama within the framework of dharma. Attaining *moksha* is Parama Purushartha (Mishra, 2013). Kuppaswamy translates the views of Manu on the relative value of dharma, Artha, and Kama thus, “Some declare that the chief good of

Assistant Professor, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, India.

***Corresponding Author:** Alka Ranjan, Assistant Professor, JAIN (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, India., E-Mail: ranjanalka67@gmail.com

How to cite this article: Ranjan, A. (2025). Evaluating mental well-being and environmental sustainability in Indian stories. The Scientific Temper, 16(spl-1):21-25.

Doi: 10.58414/SCIENTIFICTEMPER.2025.16.spl-1.03

Source of support: Nil

Conflict of interest: None.

man consists in dharma and Artha, others place it in the gratification of Kama and Artha; some say that it consists of dharma alone; while others say that it consists of Artha alone; but the correct position is that the good of man consists of the harmonious coordination of the three. So, that, according to him, it is the combination of all the three that constitutes the chief well, the Shreyas" (1977, p. 60).

Other methods to attain consciousness are yoga and meditation. Patanjali has given the Yoga Sutras (Iyengar, 1977). Yoga and meditation, for example, Buddhist mindfulness meditation have been widely adopted in Western psychotherapy methods (Aich, 2013). Some examples are mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (Segal *et al.*, 2012) and acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes *et al.*, 2012).

One of the determinants of well-being is the environment. Both the Hindu philosophical texts and Buddhism emphasize a harmonious co-existence with nature. Buddhism propounds *ahimsa* (non-violence) towards all living beings (Walli, 1974). Environmental sustainability is an SDG (Sustainable Development Goal, United Nations, 2016), as climate change is a global threat (World Health Organization, 2023).

Hence, it is important to understand the methods to sustain the environment and enhance well-being as it exists in the Indian literature. This research study aims to examine the Jātaka tales to find the conceptualization of mental well-being, techniques to attain higher mental well-being and explore environmental sustainability methods.

Methodology

Objectives

- To examine a sample of Jātaka tales for mental well-being.
- To examine a sample of Jātaka tales for environmental sustainability.

Hypothesis and Research Questions

H_1

There will be a difference in the characteristics at different levels of mental well-being.

Q1: How is mental well-being understood in the Jātaka tales?

Q2: How is environmental sustainability understood in the Jātaka tales?

Research Design

The study's research design is exploratory and uses narrative research as stories are examined to understand how meanings are constructed about mental well-being and environmental sustainability.

Sample

The sample of the study is 30 Jātaka tales.

Purposive sampling is used to select 30 Jātaka tales as shown in Table 2, while the criteria for sample selection are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Criteria of sample selection

<i>Inclusion criteria</i>	<i>Exclusion criteria</i>
Stories published by Amar Chitra Katha that have been purchased	Jātaka tales available from other sources
English language	Other languages
Printed format	Online format

Table 2: Sample selection and their code

<i>Jātaka Stories</i>	<i>code</i>
Jackal stories	J1
	J2
	J3
Volume 553	J4
	J5
	J6
Elephant Stories	E7
	E8
Volume 554	E9
Deer Stories	D10
	D11
	D12
Volume 555	D13
	D14
	D15
Volume 575	G16
Mouse	Mo17
	Mo18
Volume 576	Mo19
Monkey	M20
	M21
Volume 543	M22
	M23
	M24
Stories of Wisdom	W25
	W26
	W28
Volume 586	W29
	W30

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis

It counts the number of times (frequency) a particular theme occurs.

Reflexive thematic analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) have given the six phases of thematic analysis that were followed in this study. The six phases are “familiarizing yourself with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming the themes, and producing the report.”

Ethical considerations

Field journals and audit trails are used during the data analysis to maintain confirmability and dependability.

Results

Content analysis and reflexive thematic analysis were conducted on the 30 Jātaka stories. Four superordinate themes for mental well-being were obtained from the reflexive thematic analysis as shown in Table 3.

Characteristics of lower mental well-being

The person with lower mental well-being alienates dharma while pursuing Artha and Kama (13%). This person primarily functions from two koshas, i.e., annamaya and pranamaya kosha; thus, unable to experience ultimate bliss. Some of the characteristics of this person are being sly, selfish, compromising, harming friends, having blunt wisdom and predominant tamas Guna.

“The jackal learned the magic spell from a Brahmin without his knowledge and used it to become the king of all the animals in the jungle. His success went to his head and he decided to capture the city of Varanasi and got killed” [J4].

“Ruru, the golden tiger saved the son of a rich merchant from killing himself after he lost all his wealth. No one knew about Ruru. However, the merchant-son was ungrateful and talked about Ruru to the king as he thought he would become rich again. However, the king did not give him anything on knowing the truth” [D11].

Consequences of lower mental well-being

The consequences of lower mental well-being are following adharmas and having negative behavioral patterns, which might lead to immediate short-term gains.

“The forester and a white elephant were friends. The forester came to know that he could earn a lot of money by selling the tusks of the white elephant. So, he took away half of the elephant’s tusks. Later, he became even more greedy and decided to take the remaining parts of the tusks. He pulled and sawed the tusks very cruelly. But for his ungratefulness, he was punished as the earth under him opened and he was burnt” [E7].

Characteristics of Higher mental well-being

The characteristic of higher mental well-being is following the path of dharma which needs to be inculcated from childhood. The stories show that leaders mainly have higher mental well-being as they have responsibilities towards their followers.

“The monkey king asked his subjects to be careful so that no mango falls into the river. But, one day, a mango fell in the river and the men came to know that there are delicious fruits in the forests. Ultimately, they found the place and decided to stay there. As a result, the safety of the monkeys was threatened and they knew that now they had to leave, but there was a big river to cross. The monkey king found a tree that could be reached by using a vine. But the vine was short, so he tied himself to it and held the tree so that his

Table 3: Analysis table for mental well-being

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Characteristics of lower mental well-being	Sly, Tamas, Annamaya kosha [J1], selfish, compromises, and harms his friends [D11]; blunts wisdom [G16] Dharma is alienated from pursuing Artha and Kama [J4, J6, D11, G16] Function from the two koshas [J6]
Consequence of lower mental well-being	Evil end [J1] Immediate gains but short-term [J4] Adharma leads to greed and influences action [E7]
Characteristics of Higher Mental Well-being	The leader saved the lives of the subjects at the cost of his life [M20] A leader takes decisions wisely [W25] Stick to decisions even when followers criticize you [W25] Following dharma is important [W26] The path of dharma needs to be corrected from childhood [W26]
Techniques for Attaining Higher Mental Well-being	Means to an end is important [J1] Eventually, everyone gets their due [G16] A good deed returns a good deed [E9] Learn the skill to live at the appropriate age [D11] Insight or Gyan is important [J1, E8] Wit in all circumstances [J2, D13] Presence of mind [D10, D13] Inculcate good virtues [Mo17] Initiative and enterprise are the virtues [Mo17]; wisdom is a virtue [W30] Wit and reason (buddhi) are important for survival [M21, M22] Guru-shishya relationship is important [D12] Be stable in all situations [M23] Think before you act [W28] Find out your weaknesses and work to improve on them [W29] Do not be self-satisfied – keep on striving [W29]

subjects could cross and go to the other side. But in the end, the last subject pushed the king and the king died” [M20]

Techniques for Attaining Higher Mental Well-being

Virtues need to be inculcated at an appropriate age. Some of the virtues are wisdom, taking initiative, and being enterprising. Wit and reason, i.e., buddhi are important for survival. Practicing insight is important as it helps a person to assess their weakness. Certain behaviours, such as being stable, witty, and having a presence of mind, should be a part of day-to-day life.

“A jackal acted like a saint and the rats started worshipping him. As they used to go for their daily work, the jackal pounced on the last rat and ate it. As their number started decreasing, the king-rat noticed it and decided to be the last one to leave. The jackal pounced on him and his trick was revealed. The king-rat outwitted him and the rats eventually killed the jackal” [J1].

“Two women were claiming that they were the mother of a baby. The case was taken to a sage. The sage asked the women to stand on either side of the baby and pull it. As a result, the baby started crying in pain. Then one woman gave up and said that her competitor could take the baby. The case was decided in favour of the woman who lost” [W30].

The following figure 1 shows the thematic map of the themes discussed above.

Table 4 shows two superordinate themes that were obtained from reflexive thematic analysis for environmental sustainability.

Features of Environmental Sustainability

The characters of Jātaka stories are animals who think, feel, and behave like human beings. Some of the animal characters who are the main characters of these stories are rats, monkeys, jackals, deer, and elephants. Both humans

Table 4: Analysis table for environmental sustainability

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Features of Environmental Sustainability	Human-animal co-existence [E7] Friendship between humans and animals [E9] The animals think, behave, and feel like humans [E9]
Steps for environmental sustainability	Environmental behaviour needs to be changed [D15] People’s consciousness towards environmental needs to be aroused [D15]

and animals co-exist and they are friends. Another important aspect of the Jātaka stories is that they are weaved around the city of Varanasi. This shows that the city of Varanasi had the amenities for human-animal sustenance.

“An elephant was wounded. It went to the carpenters who removed the splinter and dressed and nursed the wound till the elephant recovered. From then onwards, the elephant helped the carpenters in their work...” [E9].

Steps for Environmental Sustainability

People need to change their behavior toward the environment. They need to be made more aware and responsible for environmental issues.

“...The deer offered to sacrifice itself. The king himself came on the scene on hearing that it was a golden deer and said it was free to go. The golden deer said that it had come in the place of the doe. The king was touched by this act of the deer, seeing how much love he had for the other fellow animals. From that day, the king declared that no animal would be harmed unnecessarily. From that day, all animals lived with peace and prosperity for a long time to come.”

The following figure 2 shows the thematic map of environmental sustainability.

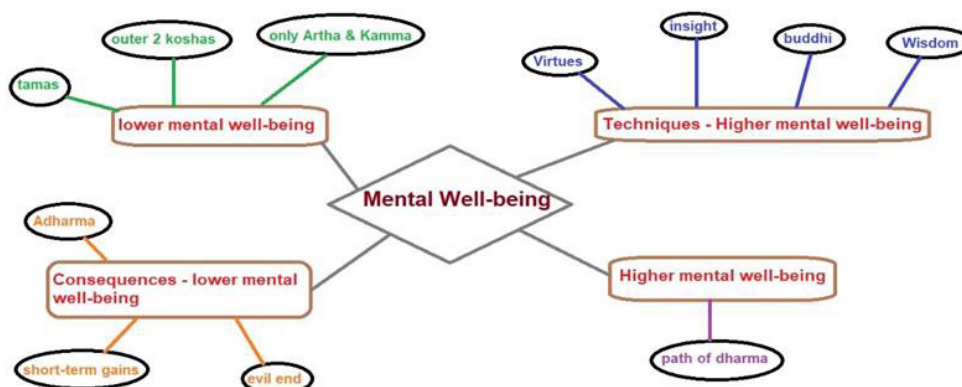


Figure 1: Thematic map of mental well-being



Figure 2: Thematic map of environmental sustainability

Discussion and Conclusion

The study aimed to explore the mental well-being and environmental sustainability in Jātaka stories. Content and reflexive thematic analysis were conducted on thirty Jātaka stories (Table 2). The findings are discussed in this section.

H_1

There will be a difference in the characteristics at different levels of mental well-being.

Table 3 shows the characteristics of the lower and higher mental well-being. The practice of Dharma Purushartha is the main difference between the two levels of mental well-being (Kuppuswamy, 1977; Raina, 2016). Being devoid of dharma leads to the predominance of *tamas* Guna and prevents a person from experiencing the ultimate bliss.

Q1: How is mental well-being understood in the Jātaka tales?

The conceptualization of mental well-being in Jātaka tales is similar to the definition given by the World Health Organization (2004). Dharma needs to be integrated with day-to-day life which can lead to the attainment of *moksha* (Mittal & Thursby, 2004). A few techniques found from the analysis are inculcating virtues from childhood, using *buddhi*, having a presence of mind, and practicing insight which can be done through yoga (Iyengar, 1977).

Q2: How is environmental sustainability understood in the Jātaka tales?

Equality and harmony are propounded in the Jātaka tales. Human-animal co-existence and harmony with nature (Walli, 1974) are the themes that have emerged from the analysis which resonates with the United Nations (2016) sustainable development goals. Some of the techniques for environmental sustainability are increasing awareness and bringing behavioural change among people towards the environment.

Environmental sustainability and mental well-being are interdependent and important sustainable development goals (UN, 2016). It is essential to find the appropriate

techniques to attain these goals. This study highlights that indigenous methods can be applied to meet these two sustainable development goals. Further research can be conducted to explore more of these indigenous methods and their implementation in the Indian population. More knowledge resources such as philosophical texts, folklore, and traditional practices can be examined to gain insight into these methods. Quantitative, mixed-method, and action research can also be used to find the research evidence for these methods. This will help our country to develop innovative and culture-relevant ways to address and meet these sustainable development goals.

Acknowledgment

I thank Viksit Bharat@2047 for giving me this opportunity.

References

- Aich, T. K. (2013). Buddhist Philosophy and Western Psychology. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 55(2), S165-S170. <https://doi.org/10.4103/0019-5545.105517>
- Amar Chitra Katha (2013). *Jataka, Panchatantra and Hitopadesha*. Mumbai: Amar Chitra Katha Pvt. Ltd.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77 – 101.
- Gautam, S., Jain, A., Chaudhary, J., Gautam, M., Gaur, M., & Grover, S. (2024). Concept of mental health and mental well-being, its determinants and coping strategies. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 66, S231 – 44.
- Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K. D., & Wilson, K. G. (2012). *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: The Process and Practice of Mindful Change*. The Guilford Press.
- Iyengar, B. K. S. (1977). *Light on Yoga: Yoga Dipika*. Schocken Books.
- Kuppuswamy, B. (1977). *Dharma and Society – A Study in Social Values*. Delhi: The MacMillan Co. of India Ltd.
- Mishra, R. C. (2013). Moksha and the Hindu Worldview. *Psychology and Developing Societies*, 25(1), 21-42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971333613477318>
- Mittal, S., & Thursby, G. R. (2004). *The Hindu World*. Routledge.
- Raina, M. K. (2016). The Levels of Human Consciousness and Creative Functioning: Insights from the Theory of *Pancha Kosha* (Five Sheaths of Consciousness). *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 48(2), 168 – 189.
- Segal, Z., Williams, M., & Teasdale, J. (2012). *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*. Gilford Press.
- United Nations (2016). *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2016*. New York: United Nations. <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2016/>
- Vikaspedia (2025, February 8). *Panch Kosha*. <https://health.vikaspedia.in/viewcontent/-health/ayush/yoga-1/pancha-kosha?lgn=en>
- Walli, K. (1974). *The conception of Ahimsā in Indian thought*. Bharata Manisha.
- World Health Organization (2004). *Promoting Mental Health: concepts, emerging evidence, practice*. Geneva: World Health Organization.
- World Health Organization (2023). Climate Change. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>