



## **Jnana Yoga- Transcending Mental Health Issues in the Covid-19 Pandemic**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper focuses on the appropriation of Jnana Yoga on pandemic concerns, specifically the mental health issues that has caused mental suffering during and after the pandemic. The relation between existence and mental health is confronted as we struggle to cope with the Covid-19 epidemic. The worldwide pandemic crisis revealed the danger of mental health risks. Around the world, there was a surge of mental health issues during the pandemic crisis, which became the source of mental suffering. The paper investigates whether Jnana Yoga can serve as an alternative response to the mental suffering brought about by the pandemic. An objective of this research is to appropriate Jnana Yoga as a response to mental suffering that the pandemic has caused or intensified. Through qualitative research, the aim is to explain Jnana Yoga by adopting hermeneutics and phenomenology, and as well as utilize secondary data regarding mental health issues caused or intensified by the pandemic. Thus, the paper shows the relevance of understanding and application of Jnana Yoga in transcending mental suffering brought about mental health issues during and after the pandemic.

Keywords: Jnana Yoga, Maya, Ahamkara, Atman, Self, COVID-19 Pandemic, Stress, Anxiety, Burnout, Depression

### **Introduction**

On March 11, 2020, COVID-19, caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS CoV-2), was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Dalpati et al., 2022). Over a year has passed since the COVID-19 (also called SARS-CoV-2) began to spread across the world, its appearance which first caused mild concern, soon turned into serious worry as more people received a diagnosis of COVID-19 (Drake, 2021). Millions of lives were shocked and devastated by the pandemic. People started getting sick and many died with COVID-19 symptoms, lockdowns were initiated, health protocols were mandated, hospitals were crowded, working and schooling were either stopped or limited, and physical contact with people was minimized. Many hoped that by the end of the year, the pandemic would come to an end and that by the following year, everything would come back to normal. But then, the situation is clearly different: the pandemic is still ongoing with novel and more contagious variants leading to increased infection rates across the globe, with consequently more stringent restrictions in social interactions and more lockdowns (Manchia et al., 2021). Many people experience sickness, trauma, stress, anxiety, depression, and even death of loved ones. This was one tragic experience that the COVID-19 pandemic gave to many. It did not only cause physical suffering, but it also caused emotional and mental suffering. The pandemic experience had a big impact on the mental health of many people (Uphoff et al., 2021). In the COVID-19 experience, the general population, different workers, students and teachers, and old and young people experienced mental health issues, which in a deeper sense is mental suffering. Lockdowns were implemented, different jobs were suspended, physical classes were suspended and turned into online learning, and different economic and religious operations were forced to stop. Because of the pandemic, lifestyle has changed, which has also created mental suffering in the lives of many. Thus, the normal flow of the daily lives of many has been disturbed and disrupted by the pandemic. The World Health Organization says that since the pandemic has affected the normal flow of daily living, some people have difficulty coping with the problems caused by the pandemic, which is a source of mental suffering. The pandemic did not exclude anyone, it affected every person possible. Billions of people have experienced the impact of the pandemic on their daily lives, with potential consequences for their mental health. Experiencing the COVID-19 Pandemic was a tough challenge for everyone. It has caused different kinds of suffering to many. Some were able to go through it, some were barely able to do so, while some did not survive the pandemic. Understanding such an experience is important to realize what is hidden beyond the suffering that one undergoes. The tragic experiences caused by the COVID-19 shows the reality of contradiction in the world. Just as we experience peaceful times, we have also experienced the tragic times of the pandemic. This contradiction will always be there, and no one can remove it or stop it because it is a natural order in the world. The real problem is found within the self. It is the self, the body, and the mind, that needs to be assessed, understood, and reformed. It is in this way that one understands different tragic experiences, such as the experience of mental suffering caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic. Vivekananda (2017) says that "The whole world is going towards death; everything dies. All our progress, our vanities, our reforms, our luxuries, our wealth, our knowledge, have that one end- death". We cling on to life, we have this energy within us that always struggles to cling on to life. This explains why many were worried, stressed, and afraid when the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world. The powerful nations in the world, the richest and most famous people, all of them were not exempted from the deadly pandemic.

Advanced technology, wealth, power, and fame were not able to stop the pandemic from causing mental health issues and claiming the lives of many. This is proof that suffering and death comes for everyone. If one truly understands and accepts this reality of suffering and death, then one realizes a higher plane of existence in the world. But how can one reach such? The answer is that we start with ourselves. Omraam Aivanhiov (2011) says “Know yourself! All science and all wisdom lie in knowing oneself, in finding oneself, in the fusion of one’s lower self with one’s higher self”. This should be a must for everyone. He explains that knowing oneself is not only about knowing one’s weaknesses, strengths, and character, rather, it is about knowing one’s true nature- the higher and true Self (Atman) which we must uncover from the mist that has hidden it. Delving deeper within is the where the path of knowledge starts. This is the starting point of Jnana Yoga.

## I. Jnana Yoga

The word Jnana means “knowledge”, “insight”, or “wisdom”, and in a spiritual context has the specific sense of what the ancient Greeks called gnosis, a special kind of liberating knowledge or Intuition (Feuerstein, 2008). It is derived from the root of the Sanskrit verb “jna” which means to know, to investigate and to recognize (Sridhar, 2015). When “jna” is added with the suffix “ana” it becomes “Jnana”. It now becomes a noun, it conveys the end goal of the verb ‘to know’, which is knowledge. Adding ‘Yoga’ to ‘Jnana’ brings it to a specific context. It now becomes Jnana Yoga- a kind of practice, a discipline, a path. Jnana Yoga (pronounced as nya-nah) is a system of Self-inquiry whereby we gradually let go of our identification with the personality until the true Self is revealed (Tindall, 2014). It also involves deep exploration of the nature of our being by systematically exploring and setting aside false identities (Bharati, n.d.). When one practices this certain path, then he/she is called a Jnana Yogi. Following the Path of Jnana Yoga means inquiring and discovering the real nature of oneself and the real nature of reality. Gaining knowledge of the world and ourselves through consistent self-contemplation and study are concrete ways to practice Jnana Yoga. Jnana Yoga offers a unique and profound path towards self-realization and liberation. It is practiced in distinguishing and understanding the difference between the self (Ahamkara) and the Self (Atman), and as well as the external world. Understanding these concepts does not stop at mere knowledge, rather it must be realized and practiced towards attaining the state of Self-realization. Furthermore, when the State of Self-Realization is attained, then liberation too is attained. Swami Vivekananda explained that Maya is the simple statement of facts, it is what we are and what we see around us (Viveka Vani, 2010). In simple terms, Maya is the external world and everything that happens in the external world. The self or the ego (Ahamkara) is bound to this Maya and through Jnana Yoga we understand this nature. It is the nature of the human person to be bounded to the maya, but at the same time, it is the nature of the true Self (Atman) to transcend this bind from maya, through detachment. Vivekananda (2017) further explains that “The Real Man is one and infinite, the omnipresent Spirit. And the apparent man is only a limitation of that Real Man”. Jnana Yoga teaches that the Real Man as Atman, is not subject to change, and is not bound by space and time. The apparent man as Ahamkara is bound to Maya and thus affected by change, space, and time. In Practicing Jnana Yoga, becoming a Jnana Yogi, one should understand such a concept. For a Jnana Yogi is the philosopher, the thinker, who wants to go beyond the visible since he is not satisfied with the litter things of this world (Yogeshwar, 1994). Understanding the ego (Ahamkara) and the nature of reality is important and through the practice of Jnana Yoga one understands that the self and the external world are both evanescent. Everything in the world and everyone is slowly vanishing because of finiteness. We struggle to come to a higher plane of existence in which we face obstacles such as our ego, worldly pleasures, and as well as different external experiences. That is why Jnana Yoga is important in order to distinguish and counter such obstacles and eventually reach a Self-realization of the true Self- the Atman. Understanding such, one realizes that existence includes living in the world of senses, but then reaching a transcendental level of existence is still possible. By continuously delving oneself into self-inquiry, contemplation and as well as study, one can realize that the world of the senses is just a part of the different phenomena of one’s existence. There are a lot of phenomena of existence that one can go through, which in other practices aside from yoga are being dealt with. On the other hand, the practice of Jnana Yoga does not only focus in one part of phenomena of existence, but it also tends to explore the different phenomena of existence. On such process one can come to a higher plane of existence despite living in the world of senses, because Jnana Yoga does not only focus on the world of senses. As such Jnana Yoga directs one to understand that there is more than just the experience of the world, and the experience of the body and the mind. Jnana Yoga is the path to this realization. It is the path that directs one into self-reflection and self-inquiry, and eventually towards knowing the true Self, the Atman.

### a. *The Concept of Maya*

Swami Vivekananda (1901) in one of his addresses at Harvard University, directly points out that ‘Nirvana can be attained here and now, that we do not have to wait for death to reach it’. Attaining the state of liberation or eternal bliss is the main goal of yoga. In reaching the state of Nirvana, one needs to understand maya to know how to transcend it. Thus, understanding the concept of maya is an important thought in Jnana Yoga. In the Vedic literature of the Hindus, the oldest concept of maya pertains to delusion, but then during the writing of the Vedas it was still being developed and thus the real meaning has not been fully realized. On the other hand, Buddhism has adopted the concept of maya to remain as is and has turned the concept into an idealistic approach. Since the Buddhist concept of maya has been rampantly more popular and known, then maya’s concept has remained to be understood as an illusion or delusion. Vivekananda (2015) already mentioned that maya does not fully mean an illusion or delusion, but rather ‘it is the simple statement of facts happening in the world- what we are and what we see around us.’ Furthermore, he also adds, ‘The progress of the world means more enjoyment and more misery too, this mixture of life and death, good and evil, knowledge and ignorance is called Maya—or the universal phenomenon’ (Badrinath, 2015). Vivekananda’s concept of maya pertains to the simple statement of facts in the world or the universal phenomenon. There seems to be a contradiction between Vivekananda’s notion and the oldest Vedic notion of maya. But there is really no contradiction because as mentioned earlier the oldest Vedic meaning of maya has not been fully realized during the writing of the Vedas. Vivekananda’s concept of maya is not a reconstructed meaning of the oldest Vedic concept of maya, rather it is a developed form of it. He does not deny the Vedic concept of maya, rather he realizes that maya as delusion and illusion is deeply anchored to the universal phenomenon. The universal phenomenon is things that happen in the world,

it is the presence of contradiction everywhere. Where there is happiness there is sadness. Where there is good there is also evil. Where there is life, there is also death. Understanding maya as such brings one to realize the simple truth of the world. To further understand the concept maya, Sadhguru and Subramaniam (2017) note that 'maya simply means that our experience of life is relative and that it is a state of self-delusion'. The problem they have seen is that people are not seeing reality as it is, rather people make it a reality of themselves- making it a state of self-delusion. Feuerstein (2011) also adds, 'Everything that is not the Self is illusion (maya), compared to a dream in the Yoga and Vedanta scriptures.' Feuerstein affirms that the world is real but it must be understood properly, giving a distinction between the self and reality. Since the self, which includes the senses and the mind, exists in the world, the senses and the mind operate in the bounds of the universal phenomenon, within the bounds of maya. That is why Vivekananda's concept of maya as the universal phenomenon also pointed out that the world and the senses must not be rejected because everything that exist is real and true. It is true that the body and mind will always be drag towards maya, especially when one always clings to it. Vivekananda (2017) also mentions that 'we cannot learn if we turn away from the senses, it is impossible for us to do.' It is thus futile to deny and reject maya because doing so means to reject all phenomenal experiences. One can only accept maya as it is and accept it as part of one's existence. In doing so, one should be vigilant in making a distinction that maya is a binding rope to the senses and at the same time maya can also be a stepping stone towards the realization of the True Self (Atman). One must accept maya as a part of one's life, but at the same time not cling to it. There must be a realization that makes a clear distinction of maya and the true Self. One needs to overcome attachment to maya, in order to let the true Self be realized.

### ***b. The 'self' as 'the ego' (ahamkara)***

We have seen that maya is the reference point where we learn and realize that the True Self (Atman) is not found in its bounds. Since maya as the universal phenomenon is separated from the True Self (Atman), it is the ego (ahamkara) that is tied up and bounded to maya. Swami Vivekananda explained in his book Jnana Yoga that one always experiences what we call a cycle of misery and pain. But why do people get involved in such a cycle? It is because of the ego (ahamkara). Feuerstein et al., (2014) in their translation of the Bhagavad Gita notes that 'The term ahamkara means literally "I-maker"'. Furthermore, Peter Marchand (2007) says that 'the Ego (Ahamkara) is the one that identifies with the body and the one with whom most people identify themselves.' The body and mind in general are what the ahamkara identifies itself. It is what many identify as the 'self'. When people refer to the 'self' they always describe it beginning with 'I am', 'I have', and 'my/mine'. Take for example simple statements of people exclaiming: 'I am rich', 'My body is fit', 'I have a beautiful face', 'My works are popular', and so on and so forth. Sometimes people tend to brag about what the 'self' have, and most of the time many people associate the 'self' with such attachments. This is a simple way of describing what ego (ahamkara) is. Feuerstein (2011) mentions that 'the domain of the ego (ahamkara) is the finite world, which, because of its finitude, is a source of unending suffering (dukkha).' The ego (ahamkara) always immerses and marvels at the bounds of the external world. It cannot escape the external world for the external world is what sustains the ego. Feuerstein (2011) further explains, 'the ego is counterfeit identity that experiences itself as separate from everything else and that consequently relates to everything else as objects that can be possessed or lost.' The ego's attachment to the external world is what makes the apparent self indulge into pleasure through the senses and the basic level of the mind, and in return the ego desires and craves endlessly to the pleasures of the external world. There are many instances that one experiences pleasures through the external world. This is not a problem; in fact, many experiences in the external world give pleasure resulting to what we call happiness that is temporary; and this is just normal. The problem here is that the ego (ahamkara) works spontaneously to let the body and mind be attached to these pleasures, making the illusion that the self needs such pleasure in order to sustain temporary happiness. Vivekananda (2015) strongly emphasizes that 'Happiness, we see is what everyone is seeking for, but the majority seek it in things which are evanescent and not real.' He also adds 'All worldly desires are but beads of glass.' Vivekananda points that people finds happiness from the pleasures of the external world through the ego, but then such pleasures are all fleeting and vanishes at some point. Since the ego (ahamkara) finds happiness to such fleeting pleasures, it consequently makes a person be blinded by the ego; making a person to be dependent and attached to pleasures given by the external world. This then results to a person to develop increasing desires for more worldly pleasures. When this happens the True Self (Atman) is covered up by the ego (ahamkara) and a person becomes ignorant of the True Self (Atman). The ego (ahamkara) blemishes a person through its routine of identifying the self with the different pleasures of the external world. Take for example simple statements of people: 'My body is sexy', 'I have billions of money', and 'I am famous'. Such statements are coming from the ego. When the ego (ahamkara) has attached itself to worldly pleasures, there is a great tendency for one to become selfish. Thus, when the ego has attached a person to these pleasures (like money, fame, or bodily status), losing them causes pain and misery. Many people struggle through these pains and miseries in life, and yet after the struggles there are still countless pains that follow. Because of the ego forcing and manipulating a person towards pleasure, the more a person becomes selfish. Such selfishness leads a person to want and desire for more, and at the moment that these desires not attained, all the more a person's life becomes miserable. That is why Vivekananda (2003) says 'the selfish man is the most miserable person in the world.' Thus, the ego (ahamkara) must be understood as a pleasure-seeking and selfish part of a person, and must be overcome and transcended. Vivekananda (2003) asserts, 'What we want is freedom, not just existing or pleasure.' Indeed, this one great goal of Jnana Yoga, to lead one to freedom and not just exist and indulge in the temporary benefit of pleasures. Feuerstein (2011) also believes that 'we can go beyond our present understanding and experience of the world and, more significantly, beyond our current egocentric state of being.' Everyone is capable of freeing themselves from the ego. Is it possible? The answer is a big 'Yes'! Nothing outside us can free us from the ego (ahamkara), but only ourselves. Krishna has mentioned this in the Bhagavad Gita: 'One should raise the self by the Self' (Feuerstein et al., 2014). This is one's goal in practicing Jnana Yoga. Consequently, there are struggles, confusions, and setbacks that may arrive, but then the goal is not impossible to reach. One just needs to continue to battle and be free of the ego (ahamkara) no matter how many failures one may experience. As Vivekananda (2017) would say, 'The idea of "me and mine"-ahamkara- is the result of past superstition, and the more this present self passes away, the more the real Self becomes manifest.'

### *c. The True 'Self' as the 'Atman'*

The slavery from the ego (ahamkara) has taken its toll on many, causing misery and pain. Many are not free from this slavery, while some, who were enlightened and persevered, were able to free themselves from it and thus attain liberation. Vivekananda emphasizes again and again the condition of the body and mind enslaved by the senses through the ego (ahamkara). The cycle of slavery to the senses will only be shattered if one starts to let go of the ego (ahamkara). Letting go of the ego (ahamkara) is not easy, this is because the ahamkara has been strongly manifested from the moment a person is born. But then, when the age of reason has come, there will always come a time of realization that what the ahamkara craves is not all there is. There comes a time when one realizes that something is missing, which is not the pleasures that the ahamkara enjoys. This is the time when one wonders and realizes: 'there is something in me that I yearn to discover, something that wants to be manifested'. And this is the yearning to know the True Self, the Atman. Hindu Yoga speaks of a transcendental Self (Atman), which is eternal and inherently blissful, as our true identity (Feuerstein, 2011). Atman means the Self and the supreme Soul (Iyengar, 1977). In western philosophy, the Atman, is regarded as what we call the soul. This Atman and the soul, which is our true identity, have the same principles. It is immaterial and has no form, unlike our bodies and other external worldly objects. The Atman is not bounded by the same limits that one's body and mind experiences. Feuerstein (2009) mentions that 'The Self (Atman) is free from punishment, without opposites, without me-sense, without objective support, devoid of attachment, free from defects, free from delusion, and fearless.' The description of the Atman as such gives us a hint that it is far above the body and mind along with the ahamkara. It also tells us that the Atman is the grandest and finest part of the human person. Iyengar (1977) shows an analogy of this and mentions that 'Know the Atman (Self) as the Lord in a chariot, reason as the charioteer and body-mind as reins, the senses as the horses.' In such analogy, one can easily distinguish that there is a hierarchy wherein the Atman is higher than the body and mind, and the senses being the lowest. But then a question arises: If the Atman is higher than the body-mind and the senses, then why is it not fully manifested? Everyone could have been free and be their True Self from the very beginning if the Atman was already fully manifested? And again, we trace back the answer to maya and ahamkara. Firstly, since everyone has been born with a physical body and a sentient mind, then escaping maya is impossible. Secondly, because of maya, the ego (ahamkara) is primarily manifested due to the pleasures that the body and mind naturally seeks, which may intensify in time. The full manifestation and realization of the Atman is blocked by maya and ahamkara. For that reason, even though the Atman resides within every person, a person is unable to manifest it and realize it immediately. It takes on a struggle and long winding journey to realize and fully manifest the Atman-the True and real Self. Why struggle when it is already a part of us? Well, that is just how existence and life work. Everyone is born to struggle but at the same time find meaning and make realizations from such struggle. Sometimes many could not understand it because life and existence are very intricate and complicated. Despite this complicatedness of life, there is the truth of the Atman, something present and alive within us that is simple and perfect. Such truth is what one must unravel. One must go beyond the egoistic self and seek the true Self. This can only be done by seeking within and not by seeking the answers through the external world. Vivekananda (2017) reiterates that 'The vast masses of mankind are content with material things, but there are some who awake, those who want to get back and go within.' One must awaken and go away from the vast masses, for following the vast masses will not answer how to realize the true Self. Going within means finding a way to transcend the boundaries of maya and of the ego (ahamkara), which majority has not been able to overcome. Going within is the way to unravel the covered True Self-the Atman.

## **II. Mental Health Issues During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The COVID-19 virus rapidly spread in different countries just a few months after its outbreak in China. Due to its rapid spread, numerous countries were affected, which soon resulted in its declaration as a pandemic. It affected the fatality rate and mortality rate of different countries in just a short period. This resulted not only in people getting physically sick and people dying, but it also increased mental health issues. Koley and Dhole (2021) affirm that 'the pandemic has taken a toll on the mental health of almost everybody.' Pawar (2021) also adds, "The pandemic has deeply impacted the psyche and health of individuals and nation states universally. Naturally, a large number of individuals, families, and communities have experienced shock, trauma, fear, existential anxiety, and grief." The mental health issues swiftly increased due to the threat of the pandemic and as well as to the changes brought about by the pandemic on society. The increase in fatality and mortality rate during the pandemic was not solely due to the virus, but the surge in mental health issues was also another factor affecting the rate of people getting sick and dying. This is the reason why even when the pandemic was slowly being fended off, still some people are getting worse and dying along the way. Though the threat of physical illness in the pandemic gradually abated with the distribution of vaccines and lifted health protocols, still there were mental health issues that were far from settled. Thus, in the following sections, several mental health issues during the pandemic will be briefly discussed.

### *a. Stress and Anxiety in the COVID-19 Pandemic*

In the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the common mental health issues is the increased level of stress. Experiencing stress is a normal circumstance for everyone. However, constant stress due to burdensome, unfamiliar, and problematic situations like the pandemic causes intense or increased levels of stress. The experience of the pandemic as such has heightened the level of stress of many people. Spread of the COVID-19 virus was already stressful to think of, and the unexpected changes in society due to the pandemic gave even more stress to many. Pfeifer, et al., (2021) states that 'the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic can be characterized as a universal and chronic stressor affecting people worldwide and across all sections of society.' Bhattacharjee and Ghosh (2021) also add 'the unexpected outbreak of COVID-19 and its related consequences are causing severe changes in our lifestyle. These sudden changes can be overwhelming for both adults and children causing stress.' The sudden changes in society made life even more difficult for many. During the pandemic, increased worry about financial, educational, emotional, and relational needs was surging the minds of many, which resulted in increased stress. Specific situations such as being infected by the virus, lockdowns, isolations, loss of job, and death of a loved one cause intense stress

that can result in further mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, or even trauma. Moving further, another common mental health issue in the pandemic was anxiety. Just like stress, anxiety is a normal emotional and mental reaction for everyone. When a person feels nervous or worried about a situation or an event, then he/she experiences anxiety. On the other hand, when a person excessively develops anxiety, which leads to a great increase in heart rate and disrupted mental state, then it becomes an unhealthy kind of anxiety or worse it becomes an anxiety disorder. During the early phase of the pandemic, some had anxiety but not on a kind of a severe level. When the immediate restrictions and countermeasures (Lockdowns, wearing of face masks, isolations, etc.) were imposed, the level of anxiety among many people started to increase to the point that it became a mental health issue. Jetten et al., state that 'in the face of COVID-19 restrictions, many people who have never experienced significant mental health difficulties before have found themselves struggling with insomnia, anxiety, and emotion dysregulation for the first time' (Jetten et al., 2020). Since the COVID-19 pandemic was a new experience to many, the restrictions imposed created an increased level of anxiety for many. The resurgence of fear often comes to mind due to the pandemic together with the restrictions, which results in people being excessively anxious about what might happen. Furthermore, research suggests that anxiety, fear, and other negative states can affect the immune system (Crandall et al., 2020). Due to the pandemic, some had heightened anxiety that resulted in a lower physical immune system. Hoffman also adds 'anxiety about a disease can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions' (Hoffmann, 2020). The anxiety caused by the pandemic also resulted in emotional disturbance, which causes emotional strain and mental uneasiness. Additionally, during the pandemic, many people turned to vices as a way to deal with their anxiety (Crandall et al., 2020). This was an old practice for many even before the pandemic started, but during the pandemic, this was an unfortunate situation to fathom. Since the pandemic gave heightened anxiety to many, being able to reach out to other people was limited. That is why some were not able to confront anxiety properly, instead, some resorted to vices to wash off their anxiety. On the other hand, people infected during the pandemic had higher anxiety risks. Studies report that SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19 virus) infected patients experience depression and anxiety, which are predecessors or risk factors for suicidality' (Pandey et al., 2021). According to such studies, infected people also experience anxiety, wherein these people tend to worsen their physical and mental health because of anxiety. Well, some patients tend to battle anxiety despite being infected with the virus. In the worst case, some patients experience anxiety to an extreme level. Extreme anxiety does not help a patient's condition to truly recover, instead, the patient develops a disoriented mental state which may lead to an extreme tendency of having suicidal thoughts. Thus, viewing anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic we understand that the increased level of anxiety had its negative repercussions to mental health.

#### ***b. Burnout in the COVID-19 Pandemic***

During the pandemic many experienced 'burnout', especially those in the working class of society. When people experience prolonged exposure to stress or frustration at work, they may develop exhaustion of physical or emotional strength, which has been termed burnout' (Wisetborisut et al., 2014). Due to the pandemic's effect on society, different jobs such as the medical field had a great increase in workload. The COVID-19 pandemic has stimulated a large number of studies on workers' mental health, and many of these have reported a high prevalence of burnout (Rossi et al., 2023). Lee et al., (2024) also state that 'The increased workload has been linked to a higher burnout rate and job stress.' During the pandemic, workload in different fields has greatly increased, which also increased the job stress of workers around the globe. During the pandemic, many workers had to work overtime and worse some of them had little rest and greater risk in their line of job. The frontliners, such as healthcare workers, were the primary ones to experience the increased workload when the pandemic started. Doctors, nurses, other medical staff, the military and police force, and even some government workers were among the frontliners who had doubled workloads and less rest. The front liners, as we speak, were tirelessly working day and night just to help flatten the curve during the intensity of the pandemic. Working in such an unprecedented situation, usually beyond their capacities, and with a risk of contracting the infection, poses an increased risk of mental health problems (Gupta et al., 2020). Many of them had to endure intense fatigue because of increasing COVID-19 cases and the tight countermeasures that need to be regulated. With the main goal of halting the pandemic, frontliners had to risk their own physical, emotional, and mental health. As such, many frontline workers have experienced increased levels of stress and many of them experienced burnout. The experience of burnout among front liners turned out to be a devastating experience, wherein some of them started to experience weakened physical health and mental health. This resulted in frontliners becoming more vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus and being infected, and developing severe mental health issues such as chronic stress, depression, and trauma. Furthermore, burnout was not only prevalent among the frontliners. It was also manifested in the educational field of society. Marrinhas et al., (2023) state that 'the working conditions of most people suffered a sudden change, imposing remote work as the norm, among those affected by this turnaround were teachers and researchers.' Aria et al., (2024) add 'One of the global measures to protect the health and safety of most people against COVID-19 was social distancing, which led to the closure of educational centers and the shift to online education.' During the pandemic, educational institutions were forced to close their doors to face-to-face learning. Different educational institutions had no choice but to have a sudden shift towards distance education, which includes modular and online learning. Due to the threat of the pandemic, teachers and students alike had no choice but to adapt to the sudden change in the learning process. Aria et al., (2024) further state that 'rapid and unplanned transition from face-to-face education to online education combined with concerns about coronavirus infection led to stressful learning environments and the risk of increasing burnout among students.' Despite the new solution of educational institutions for continual learning, shifting towards distance education was not smooth sailing for teachers and students alike. The first problem was the majority of teachers and students were not familiar with the new distance education process. Many educational institutions around the world do not practice distance education, so consequently teachers and students may not be very familiar with such kind of learning even if they are seasoned in the use of gadgets. The second problem was the resources and means available for teachers and students to adapt to the new learning process. Practically not all teachers and students had the means and resources to avail of distance education, but thanks to the educational institutions and the government for providing means and resources. Despite the efforts of educational institutions and the government to provide means and resources, still there are some teachers and mostly students who cannot avail of such means. This is also because of the pandemic's effect on the economy wherein educational supplies are also limited. The third problem was the capability of teachers and students to adapt. This was also a major concern in the sudden shift in the learning process. Though

there are provided means and resources, still not all teachers and students were capable of swiftly adapting to the new learning process. The above-mentioned problems were primarily due to the drastic changes caused by the pandemic and this has also caused burnout to both teachers and students. Marrinhas et al., (2023) say that 'the COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts on working conditions of teachers and researchers, jeopardizing their mental health and increasing the risk of burnout.' The shift to distance learning was not easy to adapt to considering the problems that it poses. Well, during the pandemic some were able to adapt to the new learning process, but then some were held off by the above-mentioned problems. The distance learning included practical, financial, emotional, and mental difficulties for many. Learning through the screens of gadgets, no physical participation in classes, lesser social interaction between teachers and students, the greater possibility of class interruption due to poor connection, and other factors were inconvenient for both teachers and students. Such factors in distance education were a source of burnout for both teachers and students, which may also lead to possible mental health issues. Looking into the experience of burnout in the pandemic, we understand that burnout was also rampant both in the medical and educational fields, not to mention the other fields in society as well. The experience of burnout is triggered due to extreme fatigue and stress in jobs or even in education. Experiencing burnout in itself becomes both a physical health and mental health issue that needs to be addressed properly. But then due to the pandemic's effects to society, there was only limited help available for those who experience burnout. Thus, burnout due to the pandemic also caused a rising case of mental health issues.

### *c. Depression in the COVID-19 Pandemic*

World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) defines depression as the presence of persistent sadness and a loss of interest in activities that you normally enjoy, accompanied by an inability to carry out daily activities. Depression has been a mental health issue even before the COVID-19 pandemic started, but then the experience of depression has seemingly increased during the pandemic. Agrawal et al., (2022) emphasize that 'the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a "second pandemic" of anxiety and depression'. Pfeifer et al., (2021) also add, 'recent studies have revealed heightened levels of depression during the ongoing pandemic'. During the pandemic depression was an increasing mental health issue, which was not a normal scenario in society. The experience of severe anxiety, stress, trauma, and as well as burnout in the pandemic has resulted in a more dangerous mental health illness, which is depression. The threat of the pandemic and the drastic changes it brought to society were triggers of depression for many. Bezeau (2020) mentions in her study that 'many people have said that they seem to be losing their minds, being stuck at home, and seeing bad news every day. When situations like these happen, people tend to lose control, and some can sink into depression'. Furthermore, depression, anxiety, and sleep disturbance are common, especially when one is under lockdowns, quarantine or self-isolation' (Gupta et al., 2020). Anxiety and depression may also cause social withdrawal which will exacerbate the loneliness and isolation associated with social distancing' (Bezeau, 2020). The threat of the COVID-19 pandemic was spreading at an alarming pace, causing continuous lockdowns, social distancing, isolation, and quarantine. Such situations were triggers of depression and for those already experiencing depression, the pandemic only made it worse. Depression was developed due to different experiences of anxiety, fear, stress, fatigue, loneliness, and other factors during the pandemic. Similar scenarios and experiences were happening around the globe and the pandemic's effect on people's depression was beyond control. Koley and Dhole (2021) mention that globally during the pandemic, 'people who have anxiety and depression are on the rise. While those who can avail themselves of help can be treated by medicine, others at times do not recognize the problem or cannot consult a physician'. Besides the increasing rate of COVID-19 infection, the increased rate of depression during the pandemic was also an alarming issue. The lockdowns and quarantines, social distancing, and isolation were not only triggers of depression, but they were also preventing the means to reduce the increasing rate of depression and for people to fully seek help. Some people experiencing depression during the pandemic were not able to truly find means to address such mental issues. Because lockdowns, social distancing, and isolation were implemented, not all people experiencing depression were given the necessary means and assistance to fight back depression. Koley and Dhole (2021) further mention that "People are worried about their own life and the lives of their loved ones. For many, this is not easy to handle. Loss of sleep, nightmares, difficulty concentrating, family neglect, substance abuse, and worsening existing health conditions are common all over." The experience of depression during the pandemic also resulted in lamentable circumstances of some people resorting to substance abuse, losing sanity, and suicidal tendencies. Furthermore, depression in the pandemic did not only affect the person experiencing such, it also affected the people around them. It has affected people's roles in their workplace, home, school, and neighborhood. As such, the experience of depression was truly tragic, and for some, this has become a traumatic experience etched in their minds.

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### **III. Appropriation of Jnana Yoga to Mental Health Issues in the COVID-19 Pandemic**

We have seen that the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic was a tragic moment in human history and it clearly showed mental suffering in the experience of different mental health issues around the world. The experience of the pandemic also showed that it has penetrated the existential aspect of the human person. In the pandemic, the surge of mental health issues was an alarming scenario. The threat of the COVID-19 virus to physical health had repercussions on mental health as well. Just as the rate of COVID-19 infections increased, so did the mental health issues. Vadivel et al., (2021) strongly emphasize that 'the COVID-19 pandemic has posed a serious threat to global mental health, multiple lines of evidence suggest that there is a varying yet considerable increase in mental health issues among the general population and vulnerable groups.' During the pandemic different mental health issues were on the rise in addition to the mental health issues that were already persisting before it. From children to old people, working and non-working people, many of them either had developed a certain mental health issue or had worsened mental health conditions. As such, the mental health issues in the pandemic experience can be seen and considered as an experience of mental suffering. Mental health issues that were on the rise were not taken lightly, in fact, the government, hospitals, workplaces, and educational institutions also started to offer assistance such as psychological treatments and counseling for those who needed help with mental health issues. Jetten et al., (2020) mention that 'it is not enough to understand that we need psychology as a core part of efforts against COVID-19.' It is not surprising that some, who had mental issues and those who want to prevent it, were not contented and not truly satisfied with psychological methods and counseling in regards to mental health issues. As we speak, we are already aware that different

interventions are already available to help treat or reduce mental suffering, but then the practice of Jnana Yoga can be a new alternative approach to dealing with it. Thus, we will show how the understanding and practice of Jnana Yoga can be an alternative approach to the experience of mental suffering during the pandemic.

#### ***a. Jnana Yoga- understanding the connection of maya to the experience of mental suffering in the COVID-19 Pandemic***

In the pandemic, the experience of suffering both physical and mental showed what maya is. The experience of mental suffering in the pandemic manifested the nature of maya. Before the pandemic, life was going as usual, people were engaging in their daily routine of work, schooling, leisure, religious activities, etc. With the arrival of the pandemic, all of these activities were halted and modified, which was experienced in the lockdowns, quarantines, social distancing, online setup of learning and working, and isolations. This has become an unpleasant, tragic, and devastating experience. The simple fact that peaceful and happy times are experienced, so are tragic and stressful times tend to occur- and this is maya. The world just simply works this way. It is the hard truth that we cannot fully control what the external world throws at us.

It was mentioned in the earlier chapters that maya is not only a reality of contradiction but that it is also where one finds all the external pleasures and sense enjoyment that one experiences. This is what Jnana Yoga wants one to understand. In understanding maya through Jnana Yoga, one can realize that the pleasures and sense of enjoyment that the world offers seem to be illusions that take us away from truly discovering our true selves. In understanding maya, Jnana Yoga's goal is to bring one into the state of samvega. Cope (2006) states that 'samvega is a developmental state not mentioned in western psychological texts, it brings with it a realization that objects of grasping (money, fine things, titles, fame, people) cannot supply any true satisfaction.' The state of samvega is an experience of a semi-blissful state since the fully blissful state is samadhi. Samvega is experiencing a state that awakens one's understanding of the illusion that maya projects. In the practice of Jnana Yoga, achieving the state of samvega is an imperative step towards liberation. Entering the state of samvega paves the way for overcoming maya. Now going back to the experience of mental suffering in the pandemic, one sees its connection to maya. The experience of stress, anxiety, burnout, depression, and as well as Corona Phobia are connected to maya. In the previous chapters, we have seen that the effects of the pandemic on society were the triggers or causes of mental health issues. The increasing rate of COVID-19 infections, death of a loved one, lockdowns, quarantines, social distancing, isolation, and online working and schooling were causes of mental health issues. Looking at these experiences, one can pinpoint the common problem- and that is attachment to maya. Attachment to maya simply means that one associates the self with the world, which includes the different pleasures that the world offers. Being attached to worldly things (money, fame, jobs, privileges, status, hobbies, vices, and even relationships) causes suffering. This explains why there is a surge of mental suffering manifested in mental health issues when the pandemic suddenly disrupted the normal cycle of society. The sudden changes in society caused by the pandemic made some people lose something that they were attached to and this has caused both physical and mental suffering. Some people were so attached to certain things that it made them uncomfortable and distressed the moment that they lost these attachments. Jetten et al., (2020) mention that 'in the face of COVID-19 restrictions, many people who have never experienced significant mental health difficulties before have found themselves struggling.' This is a clear example of why attachment to certain things has caused mental suffering in the pandemic. The restrictions in the pandemic revealed how people's mental health is immediately affected, which points out how different people attach themselves to things. Attachment to the things in maya is associated with pleasure and sense enjoyment, which have been mentioned earlier to cause continuous cravings. Furthermore, the attachments to things are always associated with the self. That is why when these attachments are lost or have been minimized, the self seems to feel lacking and distressed, and this causes mental suffering. Take for example the attachment to different outdoor activities. Many people have different outdoor activities and during the pandemic, this was a prioritized restriction, except for frontliners. The majority of the population during the pandemic was restricted from going outdoors. This means that no playing outside, no face-to-face classes, no working on-site for some workers, no strolling and jogging, etc. Since many were attached to outside activities, the restrictions developed a craving of outdoor activities. This is an example of attachment to maya, and this is what one needs to be aware of. In the practice of Jnana Yoga, the understanding of maya leads one to realize that it is an illusion that one needs to be detached from. This means that detachment or non-attachment to maya will help one to transcend the problem of mental suffering. Vivekananda (2017) mentions that 'the solution is found in the Gita, it is the theory of non-attachment, to be attached to nothing while doing our work of life. He emphasizes the importance of non-attachment or detachment to maya. This is different from denying maya, instead, it accepts the reality of maya but at the same time not attached to and lured by maya. As such, when there is non-attachment or detachment to maya anything that one loses or minimizes will not cause mental suffering. Understanding maya as such, one can realize that the external world cannot cause mental suffering unless one allows it to do so. Thus, the practice of Jnana Yoga allows one to properly understand maya to reduce and avoid mental suffering.

#### ***b. Jnana Yoga- understanding the connection of the ego (ahamkara) to the experience of mental suffering in the COVID-19 Pandemic***

Going further, we move on to the relevance of understanding the ego (ahamkara) and its connection to mental suffering in the pandemic experience. In the previous chapters, it has been mentioned that the ego (ahamkara) always attaches itself to maya and as a result, it endlessly craves the pleasures of the external world. Since it is the ego's nature to crave pleasures of the external world, then it projects to the self that such pleasures are necessary for life. Patanjali (2012) states that 'we attach ourselves to pleasures because we expect happiness from it, when we expect joy from outside things, we become attached to those things.' When people attach themselves to worldly pleasures then the ego (ahamkara) takes control, dictating to the self that happiness is found in worldly pleasures. When this attachment to pleasures takes root, expectations also come. In the attachment to pleasures, the ego (ahamkara) always controls the mind, resulting in expectations. When the ego's (ahamkara) expectations of pleasures are not met nor fulfilled, then it becomes a source of pain and suffering. People driven by the ego (ahamkara) tend to develop more suffering due to attachments and endless craving for pleasures. In connection to the mental suffering in the pandemic, the ego (ahamkara) is seemingly a cause of such suffering. When the

pandemic hit society, mental health issues started to surge due to the different factors that were mentioned. The attachments of the ego (ahamkara) to worldly pleasures have caused the mind to crave more worldly pleasures, and during the pandemic, many of these worldly pleasures were restricted and minimized. As a result, the restrictions had an impact on the ego's (ahamkara) craving for worldly pleasures, which in turn caused mental suffering. To view this from a better angle, there was a global situation to set as an example. According to the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) (Bhattacharjee et al., 2021) the sudden lockdown and restricted mobility, along with isolation and social distancing during the start of the pandemic, has caused stress, boredom, irritation, adjustment disorder, frustration, and aggressive behavior. The drastic changes brought about by the pandemic have forced societies to impose restrictions, which caused the above-mentioned results. This was a true experience to many and somehow this can be traced back to the ego's nature of craving for worldly pleasures. Assessing such, one can easily say that stress, boredom, adjustment disorder, frustration, aggressive behavior, and other negative reactions are caused by sudden changes and such results naturally come because the pandemic disrupted the normal flow of society. Yes, it may be the case, but one may also argue that there must be something more beyond these practical or logical explanations. There is something deeper within that can explain why such experiences occur. Well, there can be other answers, but one thing for certain is that the workings of the ego (ahamkara) have a connection to this. If we try to sum up the ego (ahamkara), one can say that the ego is the selfish and distorted part of the self. Well, the reality is that the ego (ahamkara) is a part of ourselves and we must accept that, and yet we must also discern that it is not our whole self. In many instances, the ego (ahamkara) manifests itself in the things we like and dislike. It hides itself through the mind, either trying to take control or trying to dictate what is from what is not. When the ego (ahamkara) takes control of the mind, attachment and detachment to things occur- attachment to things that satisfy the ego and a negative kind of detachment to things that the ego dislikes. In the context of the pandemic, it had direct effects on the ego (ahamkara). This can be discerned in the mental health issues that surged. Consequently, the ego (ahamkara) would react immediately to the pandemic and its natural reaction would be to complain and then start detaching itself from it, but then detachment from the pandemic was an impossible task for the ego (ahamkara). Besides the restrictions that have taken and minimized the ego's (ahamkara) satisfaction of worldly pleasures, the impossibility of the ego (ahamkara) to stop the pandemic has also added to mental suffering. In the pandemic experience, the ego (ahamkara) would probably dictate to the self that the pandemic's threat and the restrictions are distressful and painful, which causes mental suffering. As such, one can understand that the mental suffering in the pandemic can be seemingly caused by the ego's (ahamkara) dissatisfaction- its inability to fulfill its cravings. This is a problem that would be hard to comprehend, and again it is the ego's (ahamkara) working that blocks one from knowing this. In such cases, the practice of Jnana Yoga comes in handy. It can play a vital role in comprehending and understanding the ego (ahamkara) to lessen the experience of mental suffering. Jnana Yoga allows one to open up the mind and free it from the grip of the ego (ahamkara). This can be done through the practice of inner-stillness which will be elaborated further in the following section. According to Cope (2006), 'inner stillness opens a doorway in the mind.' In Jnana Yoga's inner stillness helps us to access the mind, making it possible to distinguish and decipher the mind from the ego (ahamkara). When this happens, the mind starts to process and can pinpoint the different attachments that the ego (ahamkara) has attached itself to. As the mind is able to point this out, it paves the way for true detachment to come in. The process of detaching oneself from the ego's (ahamkara) craving for worldly pleasures implies renunciation. Renouncing worldly pleasures is accepting the fact that worldly pleasures are part of our reality, but at the same time understanding its dangers, mitigating its indulgence, and letting it go. If one can develop renunciation of the ego's (ahamkara) craving for worldly pleasures, then the experience of mental suffering can be reduced. In such cases, when a person experiences similar circumstances such as the pandemic, one will no longer be overtaken by the ego (ahamkara). Additionally, the threat and restrictions of any pandemic will no longer create too much distress, which will avoid the development of mental suffering. Thus, the understanding of the ego (ahamkara) through the practice of Jnana Yoga allows one to be aware of the different attachments of the ego (ahamkara) and allows one to detach the self from the ego's (ahamkara) craving of worldly pleasures, which paves the way for renunciation that eventually results to reducing or avoiding the experience of mental suffering.

### ***c. Jnana Yoga- understanding and manifesting the True Self (Atman) as liberation from mental suffering***

In the previous section, we have also seen the connection of maya and the ego (ahamkara) to the experience of mental suffering in the pandemic. Taking into view the experience of mental suffering in the pandemic, we have come to consider that maya and the ahamkara are seemingly the causes of such. In the disruption and drastic changes caused by the pandemic, the self's attachment to maya and ahamkara has led to the experience of mental suffering. The mental suffering that some have experienced was caused by their attachments to worldly things found within maya and as well as their attachment to the ahamkara's craving for worldly pleasures. As such, it is important in Jnana Yoga to be able to understand these notions, which will lead further towards liberation from mental suffering. If one can understand and detach oneself from maya and ahamkara then he/she can reach a state of semi-liberation (samvega), which is only a state that allows one to reduce mental suffering and not fully avoid it. Full and true liberation from mental suffering and all kinds of suffering, which is called Samadhi, can only be attained when one has fully understood and manifested the Atman. To overcome such, one must eventually need to understand and manifest the Atman. How does one manifest the Atman? Generally, Yoga practices such as Karma Yoga, Raja Yoga, & Bhakti Yoga are ways to understand and manifest the Atman, but our focus is on Jnana Yoga.

One of the primary goals of Jnana Yoga is the understanding of the true Self (Atman) and manifesting it in one's life. Freeing the self from maya and the ego (ahamkara) is an important step to achieve this. Understanding the Atman and manifesting it is ultimately the state of liberation from suffering, which also includes mental suffering. Feuerstein (2011) mentions that 'we are asked to move to Self-identity- from maya and ahamkara to Atman.' The realization and manifestation of the Atman is transcending the shackles of maya and transcending all the weaknesses of the ahamkara-making into full view the Real and True Self. This is why the Atman is also referred to as the transcendental Self. It was also mentioned in the previous chapters that 'the Self (Atman) is free from punishment, without opposites, without me-sense, without objective support, devoid of attachment, free from defects, free from delusion, and fearless' (Feuerstein, 2009). It was also reiterated that 'blissfulness is the nature of the Atman' (2007). Understanding and manifesting the Atman is being in a state of bliss, which entails no desire for worldly pleasures and no suffering. But why is there no suffering in



such a state? It is because manifesting the Atman is beyond the realm of the maya and the limits of ahamkara. Within maya and the limits of ahamkara, we understand pain, discomfort, and distress as suffering. But in the realization and manifestation of the Atman, even though there are experiences of pain, discomfort, and distress, these are not regarded as suffering. In such a sense, one can understand that the manifestation of the Atman as blissfulness is liberation from suffering. One can only understand and truly manifest the Atman through properly understanding and transcending the nature of maya and ahamkara. This is done through the practice of deliberate study, contemplation, and meditation.

Deliberate study is an essential practice of Jnana Yoga. This is elaborated to other definitions of Jnana Yoga which includes the use of the intellect to gain knowledge. According to Satpathy and Memon (2016), 'Jnana Yoga also uses the intellect to make us understand our true Self.' In Jnana Yoga, the deliberate study involves the use of the intellect, and through it, one gains insight into maya and one's nature, which includes ahamkara and the true Self. The practice of deliberate study must lead to the awareness of the pitfalls of following the path of Jnana Yoga. These pitfalls are repeated over and over again as maya and ahamkara. By understanding maya and ahamkara's concept through deliberate study, one further learns about the true nature of the Self. But the question is what should we deliberately study to understand these things? Swami Satchidananda (2012), in his comments on the Yoga Sutras, mentions, "Study or what we call svadhyaya is important. This means study that concerns the true Self, not merely analyzing the emotions and mind as the psychologists and psychiatrists do. Anything that will elevate your mind and remind you of your true Self should be studied: for example, the Bhagavad Gita, the Bible, the Koran, these Yoga Sutras or any uplifting scriptures." Svadhyaya is the Sanskrit term for study and Satchidananda deems this important in embarking towards the path of Jnana Yoga. Deliberate study of such scriptures also contributes to the realization of maya and ahamkara, and eventually leading to the realization of the true Self. Different uplifting scriptures are scattered all over the world, and many of them have already been present from ancient times and have been passed down until the present time. These scriptures and other written scriptures are very unique in the sense that they contain various insights about the world, the human person, morality, religious practices, ethical principles, philosophy, theology, mythology, practical applications, and other different aspects. These written scriptures are easily made available in our time and this should make the practice of deliberate study easier. In studying different scriptures and materials, simple reading would not suffice, that is why reading it again and again would sometimes be necessary, especially for those who cannot easily grasp the meaning. In doing so, one can slowly expand and enlarge the mind's horizon, allowing one to elevate the self little by little and eventually reach a state of liberation. Deliberate study of scriptures will not only lead to gaining new insights and knowledge, it will also help in the practice of meditation and contemplation.

The next important practice in Jnana Yoga is the deliberate practice of meditation and contemplation. Meditation and contemplation are complementary practices, especially in Yoga, but to be more specific we will be using 'meditation' to include the practice of contemplation. Feuerstein (2011) mentions another definition of Jnana Yoga, he mentions 'Dhyanayoga (Jnana Yoga) is the unitive discipline of meditation. As mentioned earlier, the practice of deliberate meditation is part of Jnana Yoga's discipline. Without the practice of meditation, Jnana Yoga and as well as other Yogic practices will crumble. Though meditation may not be the main focus of other Yogic practices, in Jnana Yoga it is given utmost importance. In the practice of meditation, the main goal is the realization and manifestation of the Atman to reach liberation. Sivananda (1994) states that 'liberation may be obtained by Pure Jnana Yoga through detachment, the exercise and then the stilling of the mind'. This is why Vivekananda (1901) also emphasizes that 'the true Self is first to be heard, then to be reasoned, and then to be meditated upon'. In Jnana Yoga the main focus is the self, the first step is to look within and listen, then comes the perceiving of what the self is trying to convey, and then comes the process of meditation. How is this done? Cope (2006) says 'in order to see clearly, to examine how things work, we will have to stop our lives, slow things down, and look carefully within'. This seems to be easy to understand, but then in practice, this requires sacrifice. Many people seem to fail to look within simply because of the failure to stop and slowdown in life. Work, careers, dreams, hobbies, desires, and all other worldly pleasures are blocking people from taking a moment and looking within. All of these things disable one to let stillness and silence sink within. This is the reason why many fail and are unable to practice meditation. One can only practice meditation by developing stillness - inner stillness. The impulse towards stillness is the central movement of meditation and contemplation (Cope, 2006). Having inner stillness allows one to clear out the mind of different bugging thoughts and ideas. This means that inner stillness enables one to practice continuous meditation. When one is able to develop inner stillness, the self is able to meditate and contemplate the things that are disrupting the self from looking within. As we have seen earlier, these disruptions are maya and ahamkara. Before the practice of Jnana Yoga, maya and ahamkara dominated the self, turning the self to perceive maya and ahamkara as the objects to be pursued. But with the help of deliberate study, the self can be aware of this and start to turn away. Now in the practice of meditation, where inner stillness has been developed, there is a sudden change. In deliberate meditation, the self does not longer recognize maya and ahamkara as objects to be pursued, rather they are now perceived as objects to be meditated upon. This now allows one to assess maya and ahamkara, deeming them as an obstacle to the true Self. Thus, deliberate practice of meditation in Jnana Yoga helps in slowly unveiling the Atman that was naturally covered by the mist of maya and the control of ahamkara.

Moving further, Vivekananda mentions that 'this Atman in all beings does not manifest Himself to the eyes or the senses, but those whose minds have become purified and refined. In Jnana Yoga, the practice of deliberate study, meditation, and contemplation allows the purification of the mind, granting the way for non-attachment, then towards renunciation, and finally towards self-realization of the Atman. But then again, we face a truly menacing problem. Wilber (1996) mentions that 'men and women are faced with a truly fundamental dilemma: above all else, each person wants true transcendence, Atman-consciousness, and the Whole; but, above all else, each person fears the loss of the separate self, the "death" of the isolated ego or subject'. Again and again, we stumble into the problem that even if there is the desire to manifest the Atman, the urge of ahamkara topples us to pursue it. Now the question arises: If I let go of my attachments to maya, stop my pursue of all ahamkara's craving, practice non-attachment, and renounce the things I have been holding on to, then does this mean I should renounce and forsake my job, my relationship, my material possessions, my dreams and as well as my successes? The answer is Yes. Everything that one pronounces as 'my' entails attachment to it. One needs to let go of these attachments to maya and all of ahamkara's cravings, and renounce them all as well. But this does not mean to abandon one's job, leave one's family and love one's, stop pursuing one's dreams, or forsake material possessions. What non-attachment and renunciation of maya and ahamkara means is to be able to live life not

in accordance with the nature of maya and ahamkara but in accordance with the nature of the true Self. This means not pursuing the pleasures of maya, not being controlled by the urges of ahamkara, and at the same time still being able to do one's work, still being with family and loved ones, and still utilizing material things without attachment. This all converges to a restructuring of the inner self, a kind of restructuring that enables one not to be enraptured by the nature of maya and not be directed by ahamkara's impulse. As such, we recognize that the true Self is not found in the attachments to maya and ahamkara, and this is the noble truth that we must understand. Vivekananda (2015) mentions 'very few people ask for the truth, fewer still dare to learn the truth, and fewest of all dare to follow it in all its practical bearings, it is not their fault; it is all weakness of the mind.' He mentions this because he realizes the truth that the mind is weak and easily swayed by the different distractions bombarding the human person. But he also emphasizes that this must not be a reason for us not to seek and live out the truth. The truth that he is talking about is the truth of the Atman. That is why there is the practice of Jnana Yoga for people to practice and eventually live out the truth that our true Self is the Atman. To live out this truth and manifest it in life, the practice of meditation is necessary. Wilber (1996) mentions that 'meditation is, if anything, a sustained instrumental path of transcendence, it follows that meditation is simply sustained development or growth.' The practice of meditation as such coincides with the nature of the Atman. It is the nature of the Atman to be our highest potential, and as such our nature should be to continually develop and reach this highest potential. One can do this by overcoming the illusionary nature created by maya and ahamkara through the practice of deliberate meditation anchored in the path of Jnana Yoga. Thus, the practice of deliberate study, meditation, and contemplation are the ways of practicing Jnana Yoga. It is practiced to overcome the nature of maya and the control of ahamkara that blocks us from realizing and manifesting the Atman. By overcoming the maya and ahamkara, one can live out non-attachment and renunciation. By realizing and manifesting the Atman, one can reach liberation and overcome suffering. The ancient yogi sages were able to accomplish this. The first Jnani yogis, through the path of transcendence-Jnana Yoga, have learned to detach themselves from the external world and realized their true Self, the Atman, and hence they have reached the state of liberation and have overcome suffering. They have written and shared the practice of Jnana Yoga and they wanted others to realize their true Self through its practice. Jnana Yoga has been developed for this purpose, and its purpose is for us to manifest the true Self. By doing so, just like the ancient yogis, we may reach our highest potential of manifesting Atman in our lives, and thus reaching liberation and overcoming all kinds of suffering.

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## Conclusion

It has been explored throughout this work that the COVID-19 Pandemic has been a devastating and tragic experience in the lives of many. It has caused physical suffering through its threatening effects on physical health and at the same time it has caused mental suffering manifested in increased mental health issues all over the world. In particular, mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, burnout, depression, and Corona phobia are considered to be mental suffering in a deeper sense. Though the pandemic has already been slowly abated through the distribution of vaccines and the decrease of restrictions, one cannot deny the severity of mental suffering it has caused. The stressful experience of the lockdowns, restrictions, social distancing, isolation, and the death of loved ones has caused mental suffering that also brought scars to people's minds and hearts. As such, this work has explored an alternative approach to counter the mental suffering that was experienced in the pandemic.

Yoga practices as an alternative approach to body and mind conditions has been widely utilized around the world. The spread of different classical and modern yoga practices has been a trend to foster relaxation, wellbeing, and as well as spirituality. In our modern period, the use of modern physical yoga has been utilized for physical and mental health. But then few has been engaged in the practice of classical yoga, including the practice of Jnana Yoga. We have emphasized that the practice of Jnana Yoga is an alternative approach in overcoming and transcending mental suffering in the pandemic experience. It was stated that the practice of Jnana Yoga is the path of knowledge, in which it demands the practice of deliberate study and meditation. In the practice of deliberate study and meditation, we come to an understanding of maya and ahamkara's nature and their truth. We understand that the nature of maya is within the domain of the fleeting external world, and that the nature of ahamkara is the craver of worldly pleasures. We then come to a conclusion that maya and ahamkara binds the self by creating attachments to worldly things and pleasures, which results to the development of mental suffering in the pandemic experience and as well as to other experiences in life. Jnana Yoga through the practice of deliberate study and meditation paves a way to transcend mental suffering in the pandemic experience through the development of non-attachment and renunciation of maya and ahamkara. The practice of deliberate study and meditation also allows the realization and manifestation of the Atman. In the practice of Jnana Yoga, we understand that the Atman is the true Self that we need to realize and manifest in our lives. Realizing and manifesting the Atman allows us to truly reach the state of bliss and liberation, and also transcend suffering in our lives. The practice of Jnana Yoga is not an easy path to follow for there are many obstacles to its practice. Our nature, our past and present experiences, our present circumstances may be obstacles for us to practice Jnana Yoga, but then this is not a reason not to try and practice it. The practice of Jnana Yoga entails great sacrifice to be done, allot of letting go to be done, and a restructuring of the self. This are all part of the process and one should not be afraid to practice it. There is no harm in trying to practice Jnana Yoga for it teaches the noble truths of life and its reward is far more satisfying than any worldly pleasure could give. In our modern era, while it is indeed true that liberation and transcending suffering is made possible through psychological means, practice of other Yoga branches, and delving into other spiritual disciplines, still the practice of Jnana Yoga offers an alternative approach. As such the practice of Jnana Yoga is one of the many ways to reach liberation and transcending suffering.

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