

# Ashtavakra Gita and the Philosophy of Consciousness: A Contemporary Psychological Reading

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## Ashtavakra Gita and the Philosophy of Consciousness: A Contemporary Psychological Reading

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** *The Ashtavakra Gita, an ancient Sanskrit dialogue between Sage Ashtavakra and King Janaka of Mithila, represents one of the most uncompromising articulations of non-dual philosophy in the history of Indian thought. Unlike the majority of classical Indian spiritual texts that prescribe gradual paths of discipline, ritual observance, and ethical refinement, the Ashtavakra Gita posits an immediate and unconditional recognition of the Self as pure, unbounded consciousness — already free, already whole, and already untouched by the vicissitudes of phenomenal existence. This research paper undertakes a rigorous, multi-layered examination of the text's philosophical foundations within the Advaita Vedanta tradition, contextualizes the legendary encounter between Ashtavakra and Janaka, and systematically explores the text's core doctrines: witness consciousness (sākṣī-caitanya), the primacy of non-doing (akartṛtva), the illusory nature of bondage (māyā-bandha), and the doctrine of non-origination (ajāta-vāda).*

**Methodology:** *In this paper, the exploratory qualitative research method is used. The relevant information is collected using keyword-based search in Google search engine, Google Scholar search engine, and AI-driven GPTs. This information is analysed and interpreted as per the objectives of the paper.*

**Analysis/ Results:** *The paper further interrogates how these ancient formulations intersect with, anticipate, and challenge contemporary frameworks in cognitive psychology, contemplative neuroscience, and phenomenological philosophy. Attention is paid to the text's radical reversal of the seeker-seeking paradigm, its rejection of soteriological instrumentalism, and its insistence that psychological suffering is rooted not in circumstance but in mistaken identification of the Self with the mind-body complex.*

**Originality/Values:** *The study concludes by proposing an integrative model that situates the Ashtavakra Gita not merely as a historical artefact of Hindu metaphysics, but as a living epistemological framework with profound implications for modern consciousness studies, psychotherapy, and the emerging dialogue between Eastern wisdom traditions and Western science.*

**Type of Paper:** *Exploratory Research.*

**Keywords:** Ashtavakra Gita, Advaita Vedanta, Non-dual philosophy, Witness consciousness, Ajāta-vāda, Indian Knowledge Systems, Contemplative psychology, Consciousness studies, Self-realization, Jñāna Yoga

### 1. INTRODUCTION :

Among the vast corpus of classical Indian philosophical literature, the Ashtavakra Gita occupies a singular and paradoxical position (Binder (2025). [1]). It is a text that commands extraordinary reverence among scholars of Advaita Vedanta and yet remains conspicuously absent from the mainstream academic syllabi that typically foreground the Bhagavad Gita, the Upaniṣads, and the Brahma Sūtras (Ghosh (2025). [2]). This relative invisibility in formal curricula is itself philosophically telling: the Ashtavakra Gita resists the kind of gradual pedagogical scaffolding upon which most institutional instruction relies. Its message is not one of incremental progress but of immediate

recognition — a teaching that, by its own admission, is most fully understood only by the already-realized (Chinmayananda (2018). [3]).

The text takes the form of a dialogue between the sage Ashtavakra and King Janaka of Mithila, composed in a Sanskrit that is at once spare and luminous. Unlike the battlefield setting of the Bhagavad Gita, where Arjuna's ethical crisis provides the occasion for Kṛṣṇa's philosophical exposition, the Ashtavakra Gita unfolds in a space of pure inquiry, stripped of narrative drama, social obligation, and devotional sentiment. What remains is a sustained investigation into the nature of consciousness itself: what it is, what obscures it, and why it requires no effort to be what it already is (Kaushik (2026). [4]). This research paper proceeds from a recognition that the Ashtavakra Gita is not merely an object of historical or philological inquiry. Rather, it presents a living philosophical system — one that speaks with striking directness to the predicaments of modern psychological life. The relentless pursuit of self-improvement, the exhaustion of seeking, the paradox of mindfulness practices that inadvertently reinforce the sense of a deficient self, the neurological scaffolding of habitual identity — all of these contemporary preoccupations find remarkable resonance in Ashtavakra's eight-hundred-year-old formulations (Stroud (2004). [5]).

The present study is organized to move from textual and historical grounding toward philosophical analysis and, finally, toward contemporary psychological application. Section 4 situates the text within its historical and mythological context. Section 5 examines the philosophical architecture of Advaita Vedanta as the conceptual backdrop. Section 6 analyses the core doctrines of the Ashtavakra Gita in detail. Section 7 traces the structure of the dialogue itself. Section 8 constructs bridges between the ancient text and contemporary psychological and neuroscientific frameworks. Section 9 addresses the text's relevance to modern life. The paper concludes with a synthesis and proposed directions for further interdisciplinary inquiry.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

The *Ashtavakra Gita* is a significant Advaita Vedanta text that presents consciousness as the ultimate reality and views bondage and liberation as conditions shaped by identification with the mind, body, and ego. Contemporary psychological readings of the text can be connected with studies on nondual awareness, self-transcendence, cognition, and mental well-being. Recent research directly links selected verses of the *Ashtavakra Gita* with modern psychology and neuroscience, especially the role of thought patterns and mindset in shaping subjective well-being (Desai (2025). [6]). Similarly, Advaita philosophy has been interpreted as psychologically relevant because it encourages detachment from ego-based identity and supports inner stability, self-awareness, and emotional balance (Rajagopal (2024). [7]).

Modern consciousness studies provide a useful bridge for interpreting the *Ashtavakra Gita*. Josipovic (2019) explains nondual awareness as “consciousness-as-such,” distinct from ordinary mental contents, while Josipovic and Miskovic (2020) [8] connect nondual awareness with minimal phenomenal experience. These ideas closely resemble the *Ashtavakra Gita*'s teaching that the true Self is pure witnessing consciousness, unaffected by changing thoughts and experiences. Psychological research has also developed tools to measure nondual awareness, such as the Nondual Awareness Dimensional Assessment, which identifies self-transcendence and bliss as measurable dimensions of consciousness (Hanley et al. (2018). [9]). Such findings support the possibility of studying the *Ashtavakra Gita* not only as a spiritual text but also as a framework for psychological transformation.

The literature further suggests that nondual awareness may have therapeutic and mental-health relevance. Mills et al. (2020) [10] argue that nondual awareness is associated with wholeness, compassion, and well-being, while Chopra and Castle (2024) [11] review its possible relationship with stress reduction, anxiety, depression, and therapeutic integration. Neurophenomenological studies also show that meditation can modify self-specific processing in the brain, suggesting that the sense of self is not fixed but can be transformed through contemplative practice (Dor-Ziderman et al. (2016). [12]). Sedlmeier et al. (2016). [13]). demonstrate that ancient Indian theories of cognition and consciousness can be meaningfully compared with modern psychology. Therefore, an exploratory study on the *Ashtavakra Gita* can contribute to contemporary psychology by offering a nondual model of consciousness, self-transcendence, and mental liberation.

Table 1: Keyword: “Ashtavakra Gita and Consciousness ”

S. No.	Area	Focus/Outcome	Reference
1	Mind’ in Indian philosophy	Indian philosophical traditions such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Gita, and the six systems of philosophy view the mind as a subtle entity subordinate to the higher Self, which can guide human growth and liberation. These traditions emphasize that the mind can either uplift or degrade an individual depending on its control and direction. In contrast, modern neuroscience and the materialistic Carvaaka philosophy reject the concept of a transcendent Self. The discussion suggests that psychiatric care should adopt an integrated approach that includes spiritual dimensions alongside scientific and technological advancements.	Rao, A. V. (2002). [14]
2	The Ashtavakra Gita: Wisdom for Modern Souls	<i>The Ashtavakra Gita: Wisdom for Modern Souls</i> presents the timeless message that true peace, freedom, and happiness already exist within every individual. Through simple explanations and practical insights, Dr. David Alan Binder connects the ancient wisdom of the <i>Ashtavakra Gita</i> to modern life, encouraging readers to move beyond ego, fear, and attachment, and discover inner joy, self-awareness, and freedom amidst the chaos of daily life.	Binder, D. A. (2025). [1]
3	Ashtavakra Complexity in AI and Conscious Systems	This paper presents “Ashtavakra Complexity,” a novel framework that connects the non-dual philosophy of the <i>Ashtavakra Gita</i> with modern computational theory, artificial intelligence, and consciousness studies. It argues that complexity is shaped by the observer’s awareness and interpretation rather than being purely objective. By integrating ideas from algorithmic information theory, cybernetics, and integrated information theory, the framework explores applications in AI design, conscious systems, ethics, and adaptive networks, while also addressing philosophical concepts such as self-awareness, intentionality, and observer-dependent reality.	Ghosh, K. (2025). [2]
4	Investigation of connection between Sloka of Ashtavakra Gita with mind	This study examines the relevance of the <i>Ashtavakra Gita</i> in modern neuroscience and psychology, particularly through the idea that human thoughts shape perception and well-being. Focusing on Sloka 11 of Adhyaya 1 and the case study “Thinking Makes It So,” the research uses survey-based statistical analysis to show that positive thinking is associated with greater well-being and a sense of inner freedom. The findings highlight a meaningful connection between the ancient teachings of the <i>Ashtavakra Gita</i> and contemporary cognitive science.	Desai, J. (2025). [6]
5	Ashtavakra Gita	The <i>Ashtavakra Gita</i> , traditionally attributed to Maharishi Vyasa, presents a profound dialogue between Sage Ashtavakra and King Janaka on	Chinmayananda, S. (2018). [3]

		self-realization, detachment, and ultimate spiritual freedom. In his interpretation, Swami Chinmayananda explains the text as a direct and practical guide for advanced seekers of meditation, emphasizing the realization of the Self beyond the mind, ego, and worldly illusions, while illuminating the path toward inner peace and liberation.	
6	Understanding Jnana and Cognition of Jivanmukta from the Point of View of Ashtavakra Gita	This study explores the concept of Jñāna in the <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> and the <i>Ashtavakra Gita</i> , explaining how true wisdom transforms human cognition and behaviour. Through a conceptual analysis of non-attachment, witness-consciousness, vasana-kṣaya, and mano-nāśa, the paper shows that a Jivanmukta attains inner freedom, equanimity, fearlessness, and selfless action. The study concludes that spiritual wisdom gradually reshapes perception and cognition, enabling individuals to realize their true Self beyond the body–mind complex.	Kaushik, P. V. (2026). [4]
7	Narrative as argument in Indian philosophy	Indian philosophy is often distinguished by its use of poetic and narrative dialogue to communicate profound metaphysical and philosophical ideas. Texts such as the <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> and the <i>Ashtavakra Gita</i> employ conversations between teachers and seekers to convey complex truths through contradictions, multiple value systems, and interpretative meanings. Such multivalent narratives encourage readers to actively reconstruct philosophical insights, making these ancient texts relevant in both Eastern and Western philosophical discussions.	Stroud, S. R. (2004). [5]
8	The Art of Non-Attachment	This paper explores the growing relevance of non-attachment as a pathway to mental clarity, emotional balance, and well-being in today's stressful and digitally driven world. Drawing from the <i>Ashtavakra Gita</i> and the <i>Tao Te Ching</i> , it explains that true freedom arises not from controlling life but from awareness, acceptance, and inner detachment. The study further connects these ancient teachings with modern psychological approaches such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), proposing an integrated framework for therapy, resilience, and personal growth.	Semwal, A., & Juyal, T. (2019). [15]
9	The Grammar of the Disabled-Able Agency Construing 'Hindu Studies'	The <i>Ashtavakra Gita</i> is a philosophical dialogue between King Janaka and Sage Ashtavakra that explores themes of self-realization, liberation, detachment, and Advaita philosophy within Indian knowledge traditions. This study examines the text's narrative, linguistic, and philosophical dimensions, particularly its representation of ability and disability, identity, spirituality, and human consciousness, while also analyzing its	Sahu, N. (2024). [16]

		broader cultural and literary significance in both Indian and global contexts.	
10	Ashtavakra Gita	The translator describes the <i>Ashtavakra Gita</i> as one of the most profound and direct spiritual texts on Self-realization, emphasizing its simple yet powerful expression of ultimate truth and human consciousness. The translation gained unexpected popularity through an online PDF version, with many readers reporting deep personal and spiritual experiences, reflecting the timeless and transformative impact of the text on sincere seekers.	Marshall, B. (2017). [17]

### 3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY :

The present research is guided by the following specific objectives:

- (1) To trace the mythological, biographical, and textual origins of the Ashtavakra Gita and establish its place within the broader landscape of classical Indian philosophical literature.
- (2) To examine the philosophical foundations of Advaita Vedānta as the epistemic and metaphysical framework within which the Ashtavakra Gita operates, with particular reference to the concepts of Brahman, Ātman, māyā, and avidyā.
- (3) To conduct a systematic analysis of the core doctrines of the Ashtavakra Gita — including witness consciousness (sākṣī-caitanya), non-doership (akartṛtva), the illusory nature of bondage, and the doctrine of non-origination (ajāta-vāda) — with reference to key verses.
- (4) To trace the structure and phenomenology of the Ashtavakra–Janaka dialogue as a model of direct transmission and the progressive dissolution of ego-identification.
- (5) To explore points of convergence and divergence between the Ashtavakra Gita's account of consciousness and contemporary frameworks in cognitive psychology, contemplative neuroscience, and phenomenological philosophy.
- (6) To assess the practical relevance of the text's teachings to contemporary challenges such as anxiety, the paradox of seeking, habitual mental patterns, and the crisis of identity in modern societies.
- (7) To situate the Ashtavakra Gita within Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) scholarship and argue for its inclusion in interdisciplinary academic programmes that address consciousness, psychology, and human flourishing.

### 4. METHODOLOGY :

This paper employs an exploratory qualitative research methodology, collecting relevant information through targeted, keyword-based queries across the Google search engine, Google Scholar, and AI-driven Generative Pre-trained Transformers (GPTs). The gathered data is subsequently synthesized, analyzed, and interpreted through qualitative thematic analysis to directly address and fulfill the study's core objectives [18-32].

### 5. TEXTUAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT :

#### 5.1 Origins and Authorship of the Ashtavakra Gita:

The Ashtavakra Gita, also known as the Ashtavakra Saṃhitā, is a Sanskrit text of uncertain but considerable antiquity. Scholars of classical Indian philosophy such as Swami Chinmayananda, Swami Nityaswarupananda, and John Richards, who produced important translations in the twentieth century, have noted that the text does not conform to any single period of composition. Internal evidence suggests that the core verses belong to a tradition of jñāna (knowledge-path) teachings that were later compiled and transmitted through Advaita lineages, possibly between the eighth and twelfth centuries of the Common Era, though some scholars place its origins earlier.

The text consists of twenty Sections (prakaraṇas) and approximately 298 verses composed in a flowing anuṣṭubh metre, the same metre employed in the Bhagavad Gita. Unlike many classical Indian philosophical texts that claim divine authorship or transmission, the Ashtavakra Gita is explicitly human in its dramaturgy: a sage of extraordinary wisdom addressing a king of sincere spiritual hunger. This human-to-human transmission is itself philosophically significant, for it suggests that liberation is not

the exclusive domain of the divine but is available to any consciousness that is prepared to recognize its own nature [1-4].

### 5.2 The Legend of Ashtavakra: Deformity as Philosophical Metaphor:

The biographical legend of Sage Ashtavakra, as preserved in the Mahābhārata and subsequent Purāṇic literature, is itself a rich philosophical parable. The name Ashtavakra literally signifies "one with eight deformities" (aṣṭa = eight; vakra = crooked or bent). According to the legend, while still in his mother Sujāta's womb, the unborn Ashtavakra was absorbing the Vedic recitations of his father, the learned scholar Kahola. When Kahola made an error in recitation, the fetus — already possessed of considerable knowledge — signalled the mistake. Enraged by this correction from the womb, Kahola cursed his unborn son to be born with eight physical deformities: bent feet, knees, hands, chest, and neck.

The philosophical resonance of this legend is profound. The sage who teaches the most direct path to the recognition of the bodyless, formless Self is precisely the sage whose body is most visibly and dramatically deformed. Ashtavakra embodies, quite literally, the truth he teaches: that the Self is entirely other than the body, untouched by its conditions, unbounded by its limitations. When the courtiers of King Janaka laughed at Ashtavakra's twisted form upon his arrival at the great philosophical debate, he responded by laughing in turn — but at the irony that a gathering supposedly dedicated to the inquiry of Truth could be so entirely captivated by the appearance of bodies. This episode, recounted in the Mahābhārata, may be read as the text's first and most visceral lesson in witness consciousness.

### 5.3 King Janaka and the Seeker's Predicament:

King Janaka of Mithila occupies a historically and mythologically important position in the Indian philosophical tradition. He appears in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad as a king whose court attracted the greatest philosophical minds of the age, including the sage Yājñavalkya — with whom he engaged in dialogues that constitute some of the earliest systematic explorations of the Ātman doctrine in Indian philosophy. Janaka's dual identity as a monarch and an ardent seeker of liberation (mumukṣu) is itself philosophically instructive: it signals that the pursuit of liberation is not the exclusive province of renunciates and forest-dwellers but is equally available to those who remain in the world and discharge their worldly responsibilities.

In the narrative frame of the Ashtavakra Gita, Janaka's predicament is the universal predicament of the serious seeker. He has assembled the greatest scholars of the age. He has listened to debates that stretched for days and weeks. He has offered patronage to learned teachers from every tradition. And yet liberation remains elusive. His asking of three questions — "How can knowledge be acquired? How can liberation come? How is renunciation achieved?" — represents the logical terminus of a certain kind of spiritual seeking: the recognition that knowledge accumulated, practices performed, and teachers consulted have not produced the freedom that was sought. It is precisely at this moment of exhaustion with the seeking paradigm that Ashtavakra's teaching becomes possible.

### 5.4 The Ashtavakra Gita in Relation to Other Advaita Texts:

To appreciate the distinctive character of the Ashtavakra Gita, it is instructive to situate it within the broader tradition of Advaita Vedānta literature. The tradition's most celebrated systematizer, Ādi Śaṅkarācārya produced commentaries on the principal Upaniṣads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Brahma Sūtras, as well as original philosophical texts such as the Vivekacūḍāmaṇi and the Ātmabodha. Śaṅkara's approach, while non-dual in its metaphysical conclusions, retains a pedagogical ladder: the student is guided through a progression from karma-yoga to jñāna-yoga, with proper qualification (adhikāritva) required for the reception of each higher teaching.

The Ashtavakra Gita dispenses with this ladder entirely. It speaks not to the student who is working toward qualification but to the student who is — in Śaṅkara's own terms — already fully qualified (uttamādhikārī), and yet who continues to seek because the habit of seeking itself has not been recognized as the final obstacle. In this sense, the Ashtavakra Gita may be understood as a post-Śaṅkaran refinement of non-dualism, one that pushes the logic of Advaita to its most uncompromising conclusion: if the Self is already free, then any practice aimed at attaining that freedom is, in the final analysis, a subtle form of self-betrayal.

## 6. PHILOSOPHICAL ARCHITECTURE: ADVAITA VEDANTA AS BACKDROP :

### 6.1 The Metaphysics of Non-Dualism:

The term Advaita, meaning "not-two" or "one without a second" (ekam eva advitīyam), designates the central metaphysical claim of the tradition: that Brahman — the ultimate, undifferentiated ground of being — is the only reality. The multiplicity of the phenomenal world, including the apparent multiplicity of individual selves, is not an independent reality but a superimposition upon Brahman, rendered possible by the power of māyā (cosmic illusion or creative ignorance). This doctrine is sharply distinguished from both theistic dualism (dvaita), which affirms the ultimate distinctness of God, world, and soul, and from qualified non-dualism (viśiṣṭādvaita), which holds that individual souls and the world are real but are modes or attributes of the Divine.

In the Advaita framework, the individual experiencing self — the jīvātman — is pure awareness (cit) mistakenly identified with the body, the senses, the vital forces, the mind, and the intellect. These constitute the five sheaths (pañca-kośas) described in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, through which the luminous Self appears as though veiled. The philosophical task — if it can be called a task at all — is not to add something to the Self but to remove the false identification that constitutes the apparent veil. This removal is what the tradition calls jñāna: not discursive knowledge but direct recognition of the Self's own nature [33-36].

### 6.2 Māyā, Avidyā, and the Mechanism of Bondage:

The concepts of māyā and avidyā are frequently conflated in popular presentations of Advaita Vedanta, but the philosophical tradition draws a careful distinction between them. Māyā is the cosmic power of Brahman through which the world of apparent multiplicity is projected and sustained — it is neither real in the absolute sense nor entirely unreal but operates at the level of conventional experience (vyāvahārika satya). Avidyā, by contrast, refers to the individual ignorance through which the jīvātman mistakes itself for the mind-body complex, projecting a sense of separation where none ultimately exists.

The Ashtavakra Gita does not extensively analyse the metaphysical machinery of māyā — this is the province of the more systematic Advaita treatises. Instead, it speaks directly and experientially to the psychological phenomenology of avidyā: the experience of feeling bound, the experience of craving and aversion, the experience of doership and its attendant guilt, pride, and anxiety. In doing so, the text performs a kind of philosophical surgery at the level of lived experience, cutting through the layers of self-narrative not with logical argument but with the direct pointing of the witness.

### 6.3 The Rope-Snake Metaphor and the Epistemology of Superimposition:

One of Advaita Vedanta's most celebrated epistemological illustrations is the rope-snake metaphor (rajju-sarpa nyāya). In conditions of insufficient light, a rope lying on the ground may be mistaken for a snake. The perception of the snake is not a pure hallucination — it is grounded in the actual perception of the rope, which serves as the substratum. The snake, however, is a superimposition upon the rope: an attribution of qualities (serpentine form, danger, movement) that do not belong to the substratum itself. When sufficient illumination is provided, the snake vanishes; not because it was destroyed, but because it was never there — only the rope remains, as it always was.

This metaphor structures the entire epistemology of the Ashtavakra Gita. The Self (Ātman/Brahman) is the rope. The appearances of individuality, embodiment, bondage, and the seeking mind are the imagined snake. Recognition (jñāna) is the illumination that dissolves the superimposition. Crucially, the rope itself requires no transformation; only the misperception requires correction. This is why the text can state, with perfect internal logic, that liberation is not attained but recognized — because recognition changes nothing in reality and everything in the apparent experience of the recognizer.

## 7. CORE DOCTRINES OF THE ASHTAVAKRA GITA :

### 7.1 Witness Consciousness (Sākṣī-Caitanya):

The most frequently recurring instruction in the Ashtavakra Gita is the injunction to identify with the witness — the unchanging awareness that observes the arising and passing of thoughts, emotions, sensations, and perceptions without being modified by them. This witness is not a particular kind of experience or a state to be achieved through practice; it is the ever-present background of all experience, which can be recognized once the habitual foreground of content-identification is seen through.

*muktābhimānī mukto hi baddho baddhābhimānyapi |  
kiṃvadantīha satyeyaṃ yā matih sā gatirbhavet || 11 ||*

If one thinks of oneself as free, one is free, and if one thinks of oneself as bound, one is bound. Here this saying is true, “Thinking makes it so”.

*English translation by John Richards (1994)*

### **Sākṣī-Caitanya: Witness Consciousness in the Ashtavakra Gita and Its Resonances in Contemporary Philosophy of Mind:**

Sākṣī-caitanya, or witness consciousness, is one of Advaita Vedānta’s most distinctive ideas about mind and self. In the Ashtavakra Gita, it is presented not as one view among many, but as the sole irreducible reality. Body, mind, perception, thought, and personal agency all arise within this awareness, are witnessed by it, and ultimately dissolve into it. Within Advaita, witness consciousness is distinguished from absolute, cosmic, and individual consciousness, though such differences arise only from limiting adjuncts and not from consciousness itself, which is one and non-dual. The witness-self stands beyond the changing states of mind and body, neither suffering nor enjoying them. The Ashtavakra Gita makes this claim especially radical: the witness is not a rare spiritual attainment, but one’s ever-present true nature, prior to all identification.

Within Advaita Vedānta, sākṣī-caitanya is distinguished from absolute, cosmic, and individual consciousness. Yet these distinctions are only provisional, created by limiting adjuncts rather than by consciousness itself, which remains one and non-dual. The witness-self is untouched by the changing conditions of mind and body. The Ashtavakra Gita sharpens this insight by insisting that witness consciousness is not an advanced spiritual state, but the ever-present nature of the Self before any false identification arises.

In Hindu philosophy, *sākṣī* (Sanskrit: साक्षी), or witness consciousness, is the pure awareness that observes all thoughts, actions, and events without acting on them or being changed by them. It transcends time, space, and the triad of knower, known, and knowing. Rather than belonging to that structure, the *sākṣī* is the prior awareness that makes it possible. Subject, object, and their relation all arise within it as witnessed phenomena.

This places the Ashtavakra Gita in a precise dialogue with the Cartesian tradition. Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* grounds the self in thinking, but *sākṣī-caitanya* points to a prior fact: thought itself is already witnessed. Before one can say “I think,” there must be awareness of that thought. Thus, the witness is not produced by thought; thought appears within the witness, which the text describes as self-luminous (*svayam-prakāśa*). The cogito is therefore derivative, not foundational, because it presupposes the awareness it seeks to prove.

The witness also cannot be understood as an ordinary subject opposed to an object. Classical Advaita distinguishes between the seer (*dṛk*) and the seen (*dṛśya*), a duality that belongs to the mind. The *sākṣī*, however, is not one pole within that dualism, but the awareness in which the entire *dṛk-dṛśya* distinction appears and disappears. Subject and object are both witnessed; the witness is neither

### **Resonances with Husserlian Phenomenology:**

Comparing Edmund Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology with Advaita Vedānta is fruitful but must be made carefully, since the two traditions show both strong parallels and important differences. A key comparison lies between Husserl’s “Transcendental I” and Śaṅkara’s witness consciousness (*sākṣī-caitanya*).

Husserl’s phenomenological reduction (*epoché*) brackets the natural attitude—the assumption that the world simply exists as perceived—in order to examine consciousness itself. By suspending doubtful assumptions about the world and the self, reduction turns attention to the stream of experience that forms the core of the “I,” even if that core resists full conceptual expression.

This search for a residual field of pure experience resembles the Advaitic isolation of the *sākṣī*, since both ask what remains when the contents of experience are set aside. The difference, however, is crucial. Husserl retains a transcendental ego that remains intentional and directed toward objects, whereas Advaita treats intentionality as adventitious rather than essential to consciousness. In the Ashtavakra Gita, the *sākṣī* is non-intentional—awareness without object or target—and thus Advaita moves beyond Husserl by dissolving even the transcendental ego into self-luminous awareness.

### Varela and the Neurophenomenological Programme:

The link to contemporary consciousness studies is especially clear in the work of Francisco Varela, who helped found neurophenomenology. Varela distinguished intentional awareness, directed toward an object, from non-intentional awareness as pure presence. In mindfulness practice, this points to an always-available awareness prior to engagement with objects.

This closely parallels the doctrine of *sākṣī*. Varela's "pure presence" resembles the Ashtavakra Gita's witness: that by which all seeing, hearing, and knowing are possible. His neurophenomenology combines trained first-person observation with third-person neural study, echoing the Vedāntic insistence that consciousness cannot be fully explained from the outside. In that sense, Varela's programme acknowledges the irreducibility of awareness.

### Chalmers and the Hard Problem:

David Chalmers' "hard problem of consciousness" gives *sākṣī-caitanya* renewed relevance. The problem asks why neural activity is accompanied by subjective experience at all. Advaita approaches the issue from the opposite direction: consciousness is primary and matter itself appears within it rather than producing it.

Chalmers also notes an affinity between Vedānta and contemporary consciousness studies. His distinction between functional awareness and subjective experience parallels the Advaitic distinction between *cidābhāsa* and *sākṣī-caitanya*. Likewise, his view of consciousness as irreducible and fundamental resonates—though not doctrinally—with Advaita's claim that *cit* is self-subsistent rather than emergent.

The concept of *sākṣī-caitanya* (witness consciousness) has important implications for the philosophy of mind. Unlike the Cartesian cogito, which establishes the self through the act of thinking, the Ashtavakra Gita's witness is established prior to thinking — it is that which is aware of the thought "I think." It is not a subject standing over against an object, but the awareness within which the entire subject-object dichotomy arises and dissolves. In this respect, the *sākṣī-caitanya* doctrine anticipates aspects of Husserl's phenomenological reduction and, more directly, the contemporary philosophical concept of "pure awareness" explored by figures such as David Chalmers and Francisco Varela.

### 7.2 Non-Doership (Akartṛtva) and the Dissolution of Ego:

A central and practically challenging doctrine of the Ashtavakra Gita concerns the illusory nature of personal agency. The text insists that the sense of being a doer — the conviction that "I am the one who is acting" — is itself a form of superimposition upon the Self. Bodies move, thoughts arise, actions occur but none of this activity belongs to the Self, which remains forever actionless (*niṣkriya*), unaffected, and unentangled.

This doctrine is not, it is crucial to note, a counsel of passivity or nihilism. King Janaka does not abandon his kingdom upon receiving Ashtavakra's teaching; he governs it more wisely and effectively than before, now freed from the psychological burden of doer ship's attendant anxieties: the need for recognition, the fear of failure, the compulsive rehearsal of outcomes. The Ashtavakra Gita's position is that action becomes effortless and clean precisely when it is no longer contaminated by the ego's claim to authorship.

### 7.3 The Doctrine of Non-Origination (Ajāta-Vāda):

The most philosophically radical of the Ashtavakra Gita's doctrines is the *ajāta-vāda*, or the teaching of non-origination. This position holds that there has never been a bound individual who required liberation. The very premise of the spiritual path — that there is a seeker who must undergo a process in order to achieve a goal — is itself a construction within the imagined narrative of an ego that was never real. Liberation, on this view, is not an event that happens; it is the recognition that bondage was always already a dream.

*"You are really unbound and action-less, self-illuminating and spotless already.  
The cause of your bondage is that you are still resorting to stilling the mind." —  
Ashtavakra Gita, 1.15*

The *ajāta-vāda* is associated primarily in the subsequent tradition with the Māṇḍūkya Kārikā of Gauḍapāda, who is often identified as Śaṅkara's paramaguru (teacher's teacher). The Ashtavakra Gita gives this doctrine its most unsparing experiential expression: the reason stilling the mind does not

produce liberation is not that one is stilling it incorrectly, but that the one who is stilling it — the mental self-identified with the project of liberation — is itself the final obstacle.

#### 7.4 The Paradox of Practice:

One of the most philosophically provocative aspects of the Ashtavakra Gita is its complex relationship to spiritual practice. The text does not prescribe the elaborate programme of prerequisites — ethical purification, pranayama, sense-withdrawal, concentration, meditation — that most classical Yoga traditions regard as necessary preparatory conditions for jñāna. Nor does it simply dismiss practice as useless. Its position is more subtle and more challenging: practice may be appropriate at earlier stages of development, but at the level to which the Ashtavakra Gita speaks, practice — if engaged as a means of becoming what one is not — actually reinforces the very bondage it seeks to dissolve.

The tradition captures this in the aphorism: "First live the Gita, then be the Ashtavakra." The Bhagavad Gita's path of karma-yoga, bhakti-yoga, and jñāna-yoga is not rejected but superseded — applicable to the vast majority of sincere seekers who have not yet reached the threshold of readiness for direct recognition. The Ashtavakra Gita speaks to the rare individual who stands at that threshold and yet continues to seek, because the habit of seeking has not yet been identified as the last veil.

### 8. THE STRUCTURE OF THE DIALOGUE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL READING :

#### 8.1 Janaka's Three Questions as the Seeker's Diagnosis:

The Ashtavakra Gita opens in medias res with Janaka posing three urgent questions to Ashtavakra: "How can knowledge be acquired? How can liberation come? How is renunciation achieved?" The three questions are not random; they map precisely onto the three classical forms of Indian soteriological inquiry: jñāna (knowledge), mokṣa (liberation), and vairāgya (renunciation). Together, they represent the full spectrum of the sincere seeker's aspiration. Ashtavakra, in the tradition of the greatest Upaniṣadic teachers, does not answer the questions on their own terms. Instead, he reframes the entire inquiry by pointing to the nature of the questioner.

#### 8.2 The Sage's Response: Direct Pointing:

Ashtavakra's response to Janaka's three questions in Section 1 is remarkable for its economy and directness. He begins by prescribing what might appear to be ethical and attitudinal cultivation: the rejection of sense objects as poison, the cultivation of forgiveness, straightforwardness, kindness, contentment, and truthfulness. But this apparent ethical instruction is immediately followed by the most radical philosophical declaration: "You do not consist of any of the elements. To be liberated, know your Self as consisting of consciousness, the Witness of these." Virtue, vice, happiness, and sorrow belong to the mind, not to Janaka's true nature. This is the turn.

What makes this response extraordinary is its speed of effect. In the Ashtavakra Gita's narrative, Janaka requires only the first Section to undergo a fundamental shift in understanding. By Section 2, he declares himself "spotless and peaceful, beyond causality," a declaration of realized freedom that is not the endpoint of the dialogue but its beginning. The remainder of the text — Janaka's increasingly refined articulations of his awakened condition, Ashtavakra's testing and deepening of that understanding — constitutes what might be called the phenomenology of stabilized realization.

#### 8.3 The Progressive Dissolution of Ego:

The structure of the dialogue across twenty Sections enacts a progressive stripping away of residual ego-identification. After Janaka's initial declaration of realization, Ashtavakra poses a pointed question: why would someone who has recognized their true nature continue to desire wealth and kingdom? This question is not an accusation but a diagnostic probe — testing whether Janaka's realization is genuinely embodied or remains at the level of intellectual comprehension. Janaka's subsequent responses demonstrate an evolution from conceptual clarity to what the tradition calls sahaja samādhi: the natural, effortless abiding in one's true nature under all conditions, including the conditions of active worldly engagement.

#### 8.4 The Liberated Being in the World: Jīvanmukti:

The final Sections of the Ashtavakra Gita describe the condition of the jīvanmukta: the being who is liberated while alive. This is not the liberation of the death-wish — the escape from embodiment into

some transcendent realm — but the liberation of full, engaged presence in the world, uncontaminated by the psychological machinery of preference, resistance, and self-narrative. Desires may arise, but they do not drive. Thoughts appear, but they do not bind. The *jīvanmukta* functions, as the text memorably states, "like a dead leaf blown by the wind" — responsive to the currents of life without being the author of a personal trajectory.

Janaka's instruction from Ashtavakra to return to his kingdom and govern it — rather than remaining in the forest ashram — is the text's clearest statement of the non-renunciative character of its liberation. The Ashtavakra Gita does not advocate withdrawal from the world but a transformed relationship to the world: one in which action occurs without the psychological weight of doer ship, and engagement proceeds without the distortion of egoic agenda.

## 9. BRIDGES TO CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGY AND CONSCIOUSNESS STUDIES :

### 9.1 The Ashtavakra Gita and Contemplative Neuroscience:

The past three decades have witnessed a remarkable convergence between the contemplative traditions of Asia and the emerging sciences of mind and brain.

Researchers such as Richard Davidson, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Antonio Damasio, and Francisco Varela have applied rigorous empirical methods to the study of meditation, mindfulness, and subjective experience. Davidson examines the neural bases of emotion and human flourishing using tools such as MRI, PET, EEG, and genetic methods. Kabat-Zinn adapted Theravāda-derived practices to clinical settings with strong scientific discipline. Damasio has argued that consciousness is a biological process grounded in layered neural processing and bodily feedback. Varela proposed neurophenomenology, which combines trained first-person observation with third-person brain measurement.

Much of this research focuses on gradual, practice-based traditions—such as Theravāda *vipassanā*, Tibetan deity yoga, and Zen koan practice—whose effects are easier to study over time. Dominant neuroscientific models place focused attention, open monitoring, and non-dual meditation on a continuum of progressively loosening predictive habits, including the sense of self. Yet even this framework tends to treat non-dual awareness as an outcome of practice rather than the ever-present ground that the Ashtavakra Gita describes. From that perspective, consciousness-as-such is non-conceptual, non-propositional, and non-representational, and cannot be fully captured by models based only on arousal and phenomenal content.

This empirical gap reflects a deeper methodological challenge. The Ashtavakra Gita's instantaneous recognition of the Self (*ātma-jñāna*) is not a gradual change like an eight-week MBSR outcome, but the recognition of what was always already present. Because standard neuroimaging is designed to detect change over time, it is poorly suited to register a realization that is not acquired and leaves no new neural trace. This remains an unresolved frontier between contemplative science and Advaita.

The Ashtavakra Gita's framework poses distinctive challenges and opportunities for contemplative neuroscience. Its central claim — that liberation is not a state produced by practice but a recognition that was always already the case — cannot be straightforwardly operationalized in terms of before-and-after brain scan comparisons. Yet the phenomenological reports of individuals who describe a sudden shift in the locus of self-identification, from identification with the contents of consciousness to identification with consciousness itself, are increasingly being documented in clinical and research contexts. These reports parallel the Ashtavakra Gita's account of Janaka's rapid recognition more closely than they parallel the gradual progress models that dominate much of contemporary mindfulness research.

### 9.2 Witness Consciousness and the Default Mode Network:

One area of particular convergence between the Ashtavakra Gita and contemporary neuroscience concerns the relationship between self-referential cognition and the default mode network (DMN). The DMN, identified through neuroimaging studies, is a network of brain regions that becomes active during mind-wandering, self-referential thought, and the construction of autobiographical narrative — precisely the activity that the Ashtavakra Gita identifies as the mechanism of bondage. Meditation practices aimed at disrupting DMN activity have been associated with reduced anxiety, decreased rumination, and heightened sense of presence.

The Ashtavakra Gita's witness consciousness can be tentatively mapped onto the neurological concept of meta-cognition — the awareness of one's own mental processes — but the mapping is only partial.

Meta-cognition, as studied in cognitive psychology, remains a cognitive operation: it is awareness operating within the domain of thought. The Ashtavakra Gita's *sākṣī* points to something more fundamental: the awareness that is prior to and independent of all cognitive operations, including the operation of meta-cognition itself. Whether this "prior awareness" corresponds to any identifiable neural correlate, or whether it constitutes a dimension of experience that exceeds the explanatory reach of third-person neuroscientific methodology, remains an open and important question.

### 9.3 The Paradox of Mindfulness and the Ashtavakra Critique of Seeking:

The global popularity of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) since the 1990s has made mindfulness one of the most extensively researched psychological interventions of the twenty-first century. MBIs have demonstrated efficacy across a range of clinical presentations, including major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, chronic pain, and substance use disorders. However, critics within both the contemplative traditions and the academic study of Buddhism have noted that the secularized, clinicized version of mindfulness may in certain respects contradict the deeper insights of the traditions from which it draws.

The Ashtavakra Gita's perspective on this paradox is illuminating. The text's warning that practice, if engaged as a means of becoming free, can reinforce the belief in one's own unfreedom applies with particular force to mindfulness practices that are framed as techniques for achieving a calmer, more present, more equanimous self. If the practitioner's implicit premise is "I am currently not sufficiently mindful, and through consistent practice I will become more mindful," then the practice, however beneficial in symptomatic terms, is operating within the very structure of seeking that the Ashtavakra Gita identifies as the root of suffering. The text does not counsel abandonment of such practices, but it insists on a more radical question: who is it that seeks to become more mindful?

### 9.4 Psychological Identity, Habitual Neural Circuitry, and the Ashtavakra Gita's Diagnosis:

Contemporary developmental psychology has extensively documented the processes through which the human child constructs a sense of personal identity through social interaction, language acquisition, and the internalization of relational experiences. By early adulthood, the self-concept has become a highly consolidated structure, maintained through the continuous operation of autobiographical memory, social comparison, and narrative self-construction. This structure is neither static nor monolithic — it is constantly updated in response to experience — but it operates with a degree of automaticity and momentum that most individuals experience as simply "who I am."

The Ashtavakra Gita's diagnosis is that this consolidated self-structure, however functionally necessary in the domain of social and practical life, is superimposed upon a deeper identity that it systematically obscures: the pure awareness that is the ground of all experience. The psychological suffering associated with this superimposition — anxiety about the future, regret about the past, comparison with others, the sense of inadequacy, the fear of death — is not incidental to the construction of a personal self but is intrinsic to it. The text's prescription is not a better-constructed self but a recognition of the Self that precedes and underlies all construction.

## 10. RELEVANCE TO CONTEMPORARY LIFE AND MODERN CONSCIOUSNESS :

### 10.1 The Exhaustion of the Self-Improvement Paradigm:

Contemporary Western culture is saturated with a self-improvement ideology that regards the human being as a project under perpetual construction. From productivity optimization to emotional intelligence development, from physical enhancement to cognitive augmentation, the dominant cultural narrative is one of deficiency and amelioration: you are not yet what you could or should be, and the right programme of interventions will close the gap. This ideology has generated extraordinary material productivity and genuine advances in human capability; it has also generated levels of psychological exhaustion, anxiety, and self-critical rumination that are, by any measure, historically unprecedented.

The Ashtavakra Gita speaks directly to this exhaustion — not by counselling resignation or passivity, but by questioning the premise that generates it. If the Self is already free, already whole, already complete — if the boundlessness of pure awareness is not an achievement to be earned but a recognition to be received — then the entire edifice of the self-improvement project is revealed as a misunderstanding. This is not a comfortable teaching. It does not offer a new and better programme. It offers, instead, the recognition that the one who seeks improvement is not the one that is ultimately real.

### 10.2 Liberation in the Workplace: The Ashtavakra Gita and Professional Life:

It is significant that the Ashtavakra Gita's central exemplar of liberation is not a renunciate but a king — a figure of extraordinary worldly responsibility and engagement. Janaka returns to his palace and continues to govern, now from a condition of realized freedom. This narrative choice constitutes a powerful endorsement of what might be called "enlightened engagement": the possibility of functioning at the highest levels of worldly competence and responsibility while remaining, in one's innermost being, untouched by the psychological turbulences of ambition, fear, and ego-investment that typically accompany such functions.

For the modern professional — whether a corporate executive, a university administrator, a medical practitioner, or an educator — the Ashtavakra Gita's teaching on non-doer ship offers a potentially transformative reorientation. Actions need not be preceded by the anxious ego's need to author outcomes, nor followed by the ego's compulsive appraisal of its own performance. Work can happen from a condition of presence rather than pressure, from clarity rather than compulsion. This is not merely philosophical speculation; it aligns closely with the psychological literature on intrinsic motivation, flow states, and the performance benefits of reduced ego-involvement.

### 10.3 Fear, Anxiety, and the Self That Cannot Die:

The Ashtavakra Gita's account of psychological suffering locates its root not in any particular set of circumstances but in the identification of the Self with what is impermanent. Bodies age and die; relationships end; possessions are lost; reputations fluctuate; health fails. All of these losses are, from the perspective of identification with the Ātman, ultimately irrelevant — not because they do not occur, but because the Self they appear to threaten is not, in the final analysis, the Self that one truly is.

This is not a teaching of cold indifference or dissociation from life's losses. It is a teaching about the ground from which loss is experienced. The Ashtavakra Gita does not say that grief or pain does not arise; it says that these arisings occur within an awareness that is itself untouched by them — as waves arise within an ocean that remains, in its depth, undisturbed. For individuals navigating existential anxiety, grief, chronic illness, or the approach of death, this teaching offers a philosophical and experiential resource of considerable power.

## 11. CONCLUSION :

This research paper has undertaken a systematic and multi-dimensional study of the Ashtavakra Gita, examining it as a philosophical text, as a phenomenological document of the process of awakening, and as a living resource for the study of consciousness in contemporary psychological and academic contexts. Several principal findings emerge from this analysis.

First, the Ashtavakra Gita occupies a philosophically unique position within the Advaita Vedanta tradition. While sharing its ultimate metaphysical conclusions with Śaṅkara's systematic non-dualism, it adopts a pedagogical strategy that is radically non-gradual, addressing the seeker not as a student who must be brought through stages of preparation but as a consciousness that is already, in every moment, what it has always been seeking. This makes the text unusually demanding and unusually precise: it requires, of its reader, not the accumulation of understanding but the willingness to question the one who is accumulating.

Second, the text's core doctrines — witness consciousness, non-doer ship, the illusory nature of bondage, and the teaching of non-origination — constitute a coherent and internally consistent philosophical system that deserves to be evaluated not only within the context of Indian religious studies but within the broader context of philosophy of mind, consciousness studies, and phenomenology. The correspondences and divergences between these doctrines and contemporary frameworks in cognitive science, contemplative neuroscience, and clinical psychology represent a rich and largely underexplored field of inquiry.

Third, the text's insistence on the immediate availability of liberation — its rejection of the premise that freedom lies at the end of a long and effortful path — does not represent a retreat from rigour but a deepening of it. The Ashtavakra Gita demands more, not less, of its reader: not the diligence of a practitioner who applies techniques correctly, but the intellectual and existential courage to question the very one who is seeking to apply them. This is, in the fullest sense of the word, a radical teaching.

Finally, the Ashtavakra Gita's relevance to modern life is not diminished by the millennia that separate it from the twenty-first century. If anything, the conditions of contemporary existence — the psychological exhaustion of the self-improvement paradigm, the epidemic of anxiety rooted in impermanence-denial, the disorientation produced by technological acceleration — make its central question more urgent than ever: Who is it that is suffering? The answer it offers, and the recognition it invites, remain among the most profound gifts of the Indian philosophical tradition to the global conversation about what it means to be human.

Future research may productively extend this inquiry in several directions: comparative studies of the Ashtavakra Gita and the Chan/Zen tradition's sudden enlightenment (*dūnjiao*) teachings; empirical investigation of the neurological correlates of the shift in self-identification that the text describes; clinical applications of the witness-consciousness model in psychotherapeutic contexts; and curriculum development within Indian Knowledge Systems programmes that introduce this text as a resource for undergraduate and postgraduate students in philosophy, psychology, and management studies.

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