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International Journal of Social Sciences Arts and Humanities

(ISSN: 2321-4147) (Scientific Journal Impact Factor: 6.002)
A Peer Reviewed UGC Approved Quarterly Journal



Research Paper

Carl Jung and Indian Spirituality: The Dialogue Between Individuation and Objectless Consciousness

Dr. Dinesh Kumar Gupta¹, Dr Pooja Hariya² and Dr Lalit Mohan Pant^{3*}

¹Department of Psychology, Dharma Samaj (PG) College, Aligarh, Affiliated with Raja Mahendra Pratap Singh University, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India

²Department of Social Work, Uttarakhand Open University, Haldwani, Uttar Pradesh, India

³Department of Psychology, Uttarakhand Open University, Haldwani, Uttar Pradesh, India

ARTICLE DETAILS

Corresponding Author:
Dr Lalit Mohan Pant

Key words:

Carl Jung, Individuation,
Advaita Vedanta, Ego
Transcendence,
Ātman/Brahman,
Psychological Wholeness

ABSTRACT

Carl Gustav Jung's engagement with Indian thought, particularly Hinduism and Advaita Vedanta, was a critical yet conflicted aspect of his psychological development. This paper explores the dialogue between core Jungian concepts, such as the Self and individuation, and Indian spiritual traditions, focusing on the fundamental tension between his Western, ego-centered psychology and the Indian goal of realizing objectless consciousness (ātman or brahman). While Jung directly incorporated Indian symbolism (e.g., mandalas), his Eurocentric worldview led to ambivalence toward contemporary Indian spirituality. The paper presents contemporary models that successfully integrate Jungian individuation (psychological wholeness) with Vedantic mokṣa (spiritual liberation), positioning individuation as a necessary psychological precursor to spiritual transcendence.

1. Introduction: The Foundational Influence of the Indian Psyche

Carl Jung's extensive and enduring interest in India, specifically Hinduism and Buddhism, is foundational to his work in analytical psychology. This relationship was both a source of profound inspiration and a "fraught" intellectual struggle to integrate Eastern metaphysics into a Western psychological framework (Collins & Molchanov, 2013). Despite a stated preference for Buddhism, Jung made considerably more use of Hindu and Vedic thought throughout his career (Collins & Molchanov, 2013). This paper examines the theoretical conflict that arose from this encounter, analyzing Jung's use of symbols and incorporating recent scholarship that aims to resolve the tension between psychological wholeness and spiritual enlightenment. Despite extensive scholarship on Jung's engagement with Eastern traditions, existing literature often either critiques Jung's Eurocentrism or celebrates symbolic convergences without fully theorizing how psychological individuation and non-dual realization can be developmentally integrated. This paper addresses this gap by proposing a **developmental-complementarity model**, where Jungian individuation functions as a necessary psychological maturation phase that enables, rather than obstructs, the realization of objectless consciousness.

2. The Core Conflict: Ego, Self, and the Limits of Western Psychology

The enduring tension between Jungian psychology and Indian spiritual traditions arises from their fundamentally different conceptions of selfhood, consciousness, and the function of the ego in human development. While both systems seek a form of wholeness or liberation, they diverge sharply in how this goal is defined and achieved. Jung's analytical psychology is rooted in a Western epistemological framework that privileges psychological differentiation, ego integration, and symbolic mediation,

*Corresponding Author can be contacted at lpant33@gmail.com

Received: 18-12-2025; Sent for Review on: 22-12-2025; Draft sent to Author for corrections: 25-12-2025; Accepted on: 02-01-2026; Online Available from 05-01-2026

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.18149787](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18149787)

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whereas Indian non-dual traditions—particularly Advaita Vedanta aim at the transcendence of ego-consciousness in the realization of objectless awareness. This divergence is not merely terminological but reflects deeper philosophical and cultural assumptions about maturity, health, and transformation. Jung's commitment to individuation led him to interpret spiritual practices primarily through a psychological lens, often evaluating their value in terms of their impact on ego stability. Consequently, his engagement with Indian spirituality oscillated between profound appreciation for its symbolic richness and skepticism toward its soteriological aims. The following sections examine this conflict in detail: first, by analyzing the conceptual opposition between individuation and ātman-realization, and second, by situating Jung's ambivalence within the broader cultural and epistemological limits of Western psychology.

2.1 The Principium Individuationis and Ātman: Differentiation versus Objectless Consciousness

At the heart of the dialogue between Jungian psychology and Indian spirituality lies a fundamental divergence in their understanding of selfhood and ultimate human fulfillment. Jung's analytical psychology is grounded in the principium individuationis, the innate psychological drive toward differentiation, coherence, and integration of the personality. Individuation, for Jung, is not the dissolution of identity but the gradual realization of psychic wholeness through the integration of unconscious contents—shadow, anima/animus, and archetypal patterns—into conscious life. The ego, while not sovereign, remains an indispensable center of orientation within this process, serving as the mediating structure through which unconscious material is assimilated into lived experience. Jung explicitly framed individuation as a counter-movement against psychic regression and undifferentiated unity, describing it as the “natural striving of the creature towards distinctiveness,” a resistance to the “primeval, perilous sameness” that threatens psychological disintegration (as cited in Pemberton, 2023). From this perspective, psychological health depends upon the preservation and maturation of ego-consciousness, rather than its transcendence. The Jungian Self, therefore, represents a symbolic totality of the psyche—a unifying archetype that encompasses both conscious and unconscious dimensions, yet remains experientially structured and relational.

In contrast, Advaita Vedanta articulates a radically non-dual ontology in which the ultimate aim of human existence is the realization of ātman as identical with brahman, the absolute, attribute less ground of reality. This realization entails the transcendence of ego-consciousness altogether, revealing awareness as objectless, non-intentional, and devoid of subject-object duality (Selvam, 2013). Whereas Jungian individuation emphasizes becoming—an unfolding psychological narrative Advaita Vedanta is concerned with being: the immediate recognition of pure awareness beyond mental content (Lionel, 2022). This ontological distinction has led several scholars to argue that Jung's concept of the Self corresponds more closely to Īśvara, the personal or cosmogonic principle within Hindu thought, rather than to nirguṇa brahman, the non-dual absolute of Advaita (Selvam, 2013). The Jungian Self, while trans-egoic, remains symbolically mediated and phenomenologically articulated, whereas brahman is understood as non-representational and beyond all psychic structures. As Collins and Molchanov (2013) observe, Jung's psychological framework does not permit the “fluid movement of ego into Self” characteristic of Indian contemplative praxis, where ego dissolution is not pathological but soteriological. From a contemporary comparative standpoint, this tension may be more accurately understood as developmental rather than contradictory. Jung's emphasis on ego integration reflects a concern with psychological stability within the Western modern context, whereas Advaita Vedanta presupposes a level of psychic maturity that renders ego transcendence non-regressive. Thus, the apparent incompatibility between individuation and non-dual realization may arise not from metaphysical opposition but from differing assumptions about the prerequisites of spiritual insight. This reframing opens the possibility of viewing individuation not as an obstacle to enlightenment, but as a preparatory condition for the realization of objectless consciousness.

2.2 Jung's Ambivalence and the Cultural Critique

Jung's engagement with Indian spirituality was marked by a persistent ambivalence that extended beyond theoretical disagreement into cultural and epistemological judgment. While he repeatedly acknowledged the profundity of Indian metaphysical systems and drew extensively on their symbolic resources, he remained skeptical of their applicability to the modern Western psyche. This skepticism was grounded in Jung's conviction that spiritual practices presupposing ego transcendence posed psychological risks for individuals whose ego structures were insufficiently integrated. Jung frequently framed Indian spiritual traditions as operating within a cultural context fundamentally different from that of the modern West. He argued that practices such as Yoga or Advaitic self-inquiry emerged from civilizations in which collective symbolic frameworks and traditional lifeworlds continued to provide psychic containment. In contrast, Jung viewed Western individuals as psychologically fragmented, alienated from mythic meaning, and therefore vulnerable to ego dissolution if prematurely exposed to non-dual disciplines (Jung, 1954/1969). From this standpoint, individuation functioned as a necessary corrective to the one-sided rationalism and spiritual dislocation of modernity. However, Jung's cultural assessments were not free from the limitations of his historical context. Several scholars have noted that his descriptions of contemporary Indian society relied on reductive generalizations that reflect implicit Eurocentric assumptions. Sharma (2023), for instance, observes that Jung's characterization of Indians as emotionally diffuse or psychologically passive reveals an underlying hierarchy in which Western ego development is implicitly treated as the normative standard of psychological maturity. Such assessments risk conflating cultural difference with psychological deficiency.

Recent post-Jungian and postcolonial scholarship has further problematized this stance by situating Jung's ambivalence within the broader epistemological boundaries of Western psychology. Singh (2021) argues that Jung's insistence on ego consolidation as a universal prerequisite for transformation reflects a culturally specific developmental model rather than a trans-historical psychological law. From this perspective, Jung's difficulty in accommodating non-dual realization stems less from theoretical incompatibility than from the ontological commitments of Western subjectivity, which privileges individuation, agency, and narrative identity. At the same time, it would be reductive to dismiss Jung's critique as mere cultural bias. His concern with psychic regression remains clinically and theoretically significant, particularly in light of contemporary psychological research documenting dissociation, spiritual bypassing, and identity diffusion in ungrounded contemplative practice. Jung's caution may therefore be reinterpreted not as a rejection of Indian spirituality per se, but as an ethical insistence on psychological responsibility within spiritual pursuit (Shamdasani, 2023). Viewed in this light, Jung's ambivalence occupies a productive middle ground. It exposes the limits of applying non-dual metaphysics directly to psychologically fragmented subjects, while simultaneously revealing the constraints of Western psychology in fully apprehending objectless consciousness. This unresolved tension sets the stage for contemporary integrative models that seek to honor Jung's developmental concerns while moving beyond his cultural and epistemological constraints.

2.3 The Mandala as Symbolic Mediation between Ego Integration and Transcendence

One of the most tangible points of convergence between Jungian psychology and Indian spirituality is Jung's engagement with the mandala. Unlike his more ambivalent responses to Indian metaphysics, Jung's encounter with mandalic symbolism resulted in a sustained and productive theoretical incorporation. The mandala occupies a privileged position in Jung's work precisely because it operates at the intersection of psychological integration and transpersonal orientation. Jung initially encountered the mandala as a spontaneous symbolic form emerging from patients' dreams and drawings during periods of psychic disorientation. He interpreted these circular, centering images as expressions of the Self, representing an unconscious striving toward order, balance, and psychic totality. In this early formulation, the mandala functioned primarily as a compensatory symbol, stabilizing the ego in moments of fragmentation and facilitating the individuation process. Subsequent engagement with Indian and Tibetan traditions, however, significantly deepened Jung's understanding of the mandala's function. As Sorge (2013) demonstrates, Jung later recognized that mandalas and yantras in Tantric practice are not merely symbolic representations but intentional contemplative instruments designed to orient consciousness toward a transpersonal center. Within these traditions, the mandala serves as a ritualized field of attention through which practitioners progressively interiorize cosmic order, moving from sensory multiplicity toward unified awareness.

This dual interpretation mandala as spontaneous psychic symbol and as deliberate contemplative technology renders it a paradigmatic example of symbolic mediation between individuation and transcendence. From a Jungian perspective, the mandala stabilizes and recenters the ego by providing an imaginal representation of psychic wholeness. From an Indian contemplative standpoint, it functions as a disciplined means of withdrawing attention from phenomenal diversity toward the realization of a non-dual center. The mandala thus exemplifies how symbolic forms can accommodate both psychological and soteriological functions without collapsing one into the other. It neither demands the dissolution of ego consciousness nor confines the practitioner to purely intrapsychic integration. Instead, it structures a graduated movement in which ego orientation is first stabilized and then gently relativized in relation to a transpersonal axis. By foregrounding the mandala as a shared symbolic language, Jung implicitly acknowledged a point at which Western depth psychology and Indian contemplative practice converge in method, if not in metaphysical articulation. This convergence anticipates contemporary integrative models by illustrating how symbolic mediation can bridge ego integration and the orientation toward objectless consciousness, without violating the internal logic of either tradition.

3. Recent Research: Bridging Individuation and Enlightenment

In contrast to Jung's own unresolved ambivalence toward Indian non-dual traditions, contemporary scholarship increasingly approaches the relationship between psychological individuation and spiritual enlightenment through a developmental and integrative lens. Rather than treating Jungian psychology and Indian soteriology as mutually exclusive paradigms, recent researchers frame them as addressing distinct but interrelated dimensions of human transformation. This shift reflects a broader movement within depth psychology, comparative philosophy, and the psychology of religion toward models that distinguish between psychological maturation and ontological realization while recognizing their sequential interdependence. A central insight emerging from this body of work is that individuation and mokṣa operate at different levels of analysis. Individuation concerns the integration and stabilization of the personality through ego-Self differentiation, whereas mokṣa refers to the realization of non-dual awareness beyond all psychic structures. When these domains are conflated, psychological integration is mistakenly judged by metaphysical criteria, or spiritual liberation is reduced to intrapsychic balance. Contemporary scholars therefore emphasize the importance of developmental sequencing, arguing that psychological wholeness constitutes a necessary condition for, rather than an alternative to, authentic spiritual transcendence. Within this revised framework, Jung's emphasis on ego integration is reinterpreted not as a rejection of enlightenment traditions but as a concern for psychological readiness. At the same time, Indian non-dual philosophies are no longer approached as advocating premature ego dissolution but as presupposing a degree of psychological maturity often left implicit within traditional discourse. The resulting perspective reframes the Jung-Vedanta tension as a problem of developmental timing rather than

theoretical incompatibility. The sections that follow elaborate this integrative trajectory in three stages. Section 3.1 articulates a developmental-complementarity model in which individuation functions as a psychological precursor to mokṣa. Section 3.2 examines contemporary distinctions between psychological growth (“growing up”) and spiritual awakening (“waking up”), demonstrating how these parallel trajectories reinforce the proposed sequencing. Finally, subsequent sections extend this model into applied domains, showing how ritual and practice operationalize the integration of ego development and transcendence within lived religious contexts.

3.1 Individuation as a Necessary Precursor to Mokṣa

Recent integrative scholarship proposes that the apparent opposition between Jungian individuation and Advaitic liberation may be resolved through a stratified, developmental understanding of psychological and spiritual transformation. Within this framework, individuation is not positioned as an alternative to mokṣa but as a necessary preparatory phase that enables its realization. Selvam (2013) provides a foundational articulation of this position by distinguishing between the aims of Jungian psychology and Advaita Vedanta. Individuation, in Jung’s sense, involves the psychological integration of the ego with unconscious contents such as the shadow and archetypal configurations, culminating in a stable and coherent personality structure. Advaita Vedanta, by contrast, directs attention beyond the psychological Self toward the realization of brahman, the non-dual ground of awareness, and offers a soteriological path oriented toward liberation (mokṣa). Building on Selvam’s analysis, the present perspective emphasizes that the transcendence of ego-consciousness presupposes its prior integration. Individuation establishes the psychological coherence and symbolic capacity required for engaging non-dual insight without regression or dissociation. In this sense, Advaita Vedanta does not negate the Jungian project but extends it beyond its psychological horizon, while Jungian individuation provides the developmental foundation upon which Advaitic realization can unfold. Understood developmentally, individuation and mokṣa thus represent complementary stages within a continuous trajectory of human transformation. Psychological wholeness does not constitute ultimate liberation, yet it remains a necessary condition for its responsible and transformative realization.

3.2 Complementary Developmental Trajectories: “Growing Up” and “Waking Up”

Further support for the developmental-complementarity model emerges from contemporary frameworks that distinguish between psychological maturation and spiritual awakening as related but non-identical dimensions of human development. Rather than collapsing individuation and enlightenment into a single process, these approaches emphasize their sequential and complementary nature, thereby reinforcing the argument advanced in the present paper. Mahaffey’s (2013) distinction between “growing up” and “waking up” offers a particularly useful heuristic for clarifying this relationship. “Growing up” refers to the progressive differentiation, integration, and stabilization of the personality processes that closely parallel Jung’s account of individuation. “Waking up,” by contrast, denotes the direct realization of non-dual awareness, a mode of consciousness that transcends egoic identification altogether. Importantly, Mahaffey does not frame these trajectories as mutually exclusive; rather, he argues that psychological maturity provides the necessary structural support for sustained spiritual insight. This distinction aligns closely with the developmental sequencing proposed in Section 3.1. Individuation, understood as the integration of unconscious material into a coherent ego-Self axis, establishes the psychological conditions under which ego transcendence can occur without regression. Spiritual awakening, in turn, does not negate psychological development but relativizes it, revealing ego identity as provisional rather than ultimate. From this perspective, individuation and enlightenment operate on different registers—one psychological, the other ontological yet remain dynamically interrelated. Mahaffey’s engagement with Kashmiri Śaivism further strengthens this integrative account. Unlike classical Advaita Vedanta, which often emphasizes renunciation and withdrawal from phenomenal experience, Kashmiri Śaivism affirms the world as an expression of consciousness (Śakti) and acknowledges the functional necessity of ego within embodied existence. This ontological inclusivity resonates with Jung’s insistence that psychic life unfolds within symbolic, relational, and embodied contexts. As such, Śaivism provides a metaphysical framework more readily compatible with Jungian psychology, while still preserving a non-dual vision of ultimate reality.

Within the developmental complementarity model proposed here, Kashmiri Śaivism can be understood as articulating a transitional ontology one that bridges psychological individuation and non-dual realization without prematurely dissolving ego structures. It thus exemplifies how non-Western traditions themselves contain differentiated accounts of development that challenge simplistic East–West dichotomies. By situating Mahaffey’s “growing up/waking up” distinction within a broader developmental framework, this section reinforces the central claim of the paper: that individuation and enlightenment are best understood not as competing ideals, but as sequentially integrated dimensions of human transformation. Psychological wholeness and spiritual liberation, when properly ordered, emerge as mutually enabling rather than antagonistic aims.

3.3 Ritual as Developmental Mediation: Operationalizing Individuation and Transcendence

While Sections 3.1 and 3.2 articulate a theoretical reconciliation between Jungian individuation and non-dual realization, the question remains how this developmental sequence is enacted in lived religious contexts. Recent Jungian analyses of Hindu ritual practice provide a concrete answer by demonstrating how ritual functions as a mediating structure that simultaneously supports psychological integration and prepares the ground for spiritual transcendence. Maru and Burboz (2025) offer a particularly instructive application of individuation theory to Hindu initiation and death rites, revealing ritual as an embodied

and communal process of psychic transformation rather than a purely doctrinal enactment. From a Jungian perspective, rituals operate as symbolic containers that regulate transitions between developmental stages, enabling the ego to confront transformation without fragmentation. In this sense, ritual practice operationalizes the developmental complementarity model by anchoring transcendent aims within psychologically integrative forms.

The Upanayana ceremony exemplifies this mediating function. Traditionally marking the initiate's entry into disciplined spiritual life, the ritual requires a symbolic separation from childhood dependency and the assumption of personal responsibility through ethical vows and daily recitation of the Gāyatrī mantra. Interpreted through a Jungian lens, this rite initiates the individuation process by reorienting the ego toward reflective self-awareness, moral agency, and symbolic identification beyond the familial matrix (Maru & Burboz, 2025). Rather than dissolving ego boundaries, the ritual strengthens and reconfigures them, establishing the psychological stability necessary for later spiritual insight. At the opposite end of the life cycle, Hindu death rituals further illustrate the complementary movement toward ego transcendence. Funerary rites symbolically dismantle personal identity through ritualized dissolution, mourning, and ancestral integration. Within the developmental-complementarity framework, such rituals presuppose a life in which ego structures have already been formed and socially embedded. The ritualized negation of individuality thus becomes transformative rather than regressive, enabling symbolic participation in non-dual continuity rather than psychological disintegration. Crucially, these rituals do not collapse individuation into enlightenment, nor do they postpone transcendence indefinitely. Instead, they structure a developmental arc in which ego formation, symbolic integration, and eventual ego relativization unfold in culturally mediated sequence. Ritual practice thus functions as a psychic technology that aligns individual development with transpersonal aims, mitigating the risks Jung associated with premature ego dissolution while preserving the soteriological orientation of Indian spirituality. By demonstrating how Hindu rituals embody both psychological differentiation and symbolic transcendence, this analysis provides empirical and cultural grounding for the developmental-complementarity model. Rituals reveal that the integration of individuation and mokṣa is not merely a theoretical synthesis but a lived, socially regulated process that has long been embedded within Indian spiritual traditions themselves. In doing so, they offer a corrective to Jung's assumption that non-dual realization necessarily bypasses psychological development, showing instead that traditional practices often encode a sophisticated developmental logic.

3.4 Neuropsychological Perspectives on Individuation and Non-Dual Awareness

Recent advances in neuropsychology and contemplative neuroscience provide empirical support for the developmental sequencing proposed in integrative Jungian-Vedantic models. Rather than collapsing ego integration and non-dual realization into a single neural phenomenon, contemporary research increasingly differentiates between the neural correlates of ego-based self-regulation and those associated with sustained non-dual awareness. Neuroimaging studies of experienced meditators indicate that stable ego functioning manifested in coherent self-representation, affect regulation, and executive control remains intact even during states of non-dual awareness (Josipovic, 2020). These findings challenge the assumption that enlightenment entails neurological regression or the eradication of self-related processing. Instead, they suggest that non-dual awareness emerges alongside, rather than in place of, an integrated sense of self. Further research in contemplative neuroscience demonstrates that advanced practitioners exhibit distinct patterns of neural integration that differentiate early meditative absorption from mature non-dual states. Dahl, Lutz, and Davidson (2023) argue that long-term contemplative training fosters a reorganization of attentional and self-referential networks, allowing awareness to operate without rigid identification while preserving functional ego capacities. This differentiation supports the view that ego integration precedes, and structurally supports, non-dual realization.

From a Jungian perspective, these findings resonate with the claim that individuation establishes the psychological and neurological stability necessary for transformative experiences to be assimilated rather than dissociated. Non-dual awareness, understood neuro-psychologically, does not abolish the ego but renders it transparent and non-exclusive as a center of identity. This corresponds closely with the developmental-complementarity model advanced in this paper, in which psychological wholeness functions as a prerequisite for sustained spiritual transcendence. By situating Jungian individuation and Advaitic realization within a neurodevelopmental continuum, contemporary neuroscience reinforces the argument that psychological integration and enlightenment represent sequential but complementary dimensions of human consciousness. Empirical research thus lends convergent support to the theoretical claim that individuation and mokṣa are best understood not as competing ideals, but as developmentally ordered stages of transformation.

4. Conclusion

Carl Jung's pioneering engagement with Indian spirituality established a crucial cross-cultural psychological dialogue. His central dilemma the tension between psychological differentiation (individuation) and spiritual dissolution (ātman) has been constructively resolved by post-Jungian scholars. By modeling individuation as a necessary psychological phase and mokṣa as the ultimate spiritual imperative, contemporary analytical psychology offers a unified path. This ongoing dialogue ensures that the rich philosophical, mythological, and ritualistic depth of India continues to stir "insight and pleasure and promise more in the future," as noted by Zimmer (1948, p. 5). Rather than viewing Jung's psychology and Indian non-dual traditions as irreconcilable, this paper demonstrates that their tension is developmental rather than doctrinal. Individuation does not

negate spiritual transcendence; instead, it stabilizes the psyche for its realization. This reframing not only resolves Jung's theoretical impasse but also offers a psychologically responsible model for contemporary spiritual practice in a globalized world.

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