



Human Goal-Seeking Behaviour: A Psychological Comparison of the Purushartha Framework and Western Motivational Concepts

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Abstract

The Purusharthic paradigm promotes a balanced and integrated pursuit of numerous life goals, in contrast to western psychological models that explain motivation through hierarchical or need-based frameworks, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-determination theory, and drive-reduction theory. The basic aim of this paper is to investigate the psychological meaning of Purusharth and applicability to modern behavioral science. Each Purushartha is viewed through contemporary theoretical frameworks: Moksha in connection with mindfulness, self-actualization, and transcendence; Kama in connection with affective neuroscience and attachment theory; Artha in connection with achievement motivation and reward systems; and Dharma in connection with moral development and prosocial behavior. The paper synthesizes an integrated cross-cultural model of motivation by conducting textual analysis of traditional Indian philosophical sources and Western motivational ideas using a theoretical and comparative methodology and literature reviews. The Purusharthas provide a multifaceted explanation of human motivation that goes beyond the individualistic and hierarchical slants of Western philosophies. The results of different texts and literature review highlight that how the Purusharthas can be used as a culturally grounded paradigm in applied psychology as well as research to better understand human motivation. Significant theoretical and practical ramifications result from its incorporation into contemporary psychology, including culturally sensitive methods of psychological testing and treatment in multicultural and South Asian settings. In the end, reinterpreting the Purusharthas in light of modern behavioral research advances the decolonization of psychological theory and practice by fostering a more inclusive and internationally applicable understanding of human motivation.

INTRODUCTION

A key concept in psychological research, motivation reflects the various forces that influence human behavior, goal pursuit, and fulfillment. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, Hull's (1943) drive-reduction theory, and Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory are just a few examples of the hierarchical or need-based models used in Western psychology to conceptualize motivation. These models emphasize the biological, cognitive, and emotional factors that influence behavior. Despite their influence, these models are frequently criticized for reflecting western individualism, linear progression, and a narrow cultural scope (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

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In contrast, Indian philosophy offers a holistic and integrative framework for understanding motivation through the doctrine of *Purusharthas*—the four primary aims of human life: Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha. Rather than prescribing a hierarchy of needs, this model acknowledges the simultaneous and interdependent pursuit of moral, material, emotional, and spiritual aspirations (Radhakrishnan & Moore, 1957). The Purusharthic paradigm thus provides an indigenous, non-hierarchical, and culturally grounded theory of human motivation that complements and enriches western psychological frameworks.

This paper investigates the traditional Indian framework of the four aims of life (Dharma, Artha, Kāma, Mokṣa) through the lens of motivation and we analyze each aim sequentially concerning motivational systems (such as needs, drives, values), psychological development, and ethical regulation. Subsequently, we integrate the four aims into a dynamic model of motivational progression and explore the implications for contemporary psychology of well-being, cross-cultural motivational theory, and therapeutic practices. The paper concludes by proposing future research avenues that connect Indian philosophical frameworks with empirical motivational psychology.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the Purusharthas' psychological significance and how they relate to contemporary behavioral science. This study aims to integrate traditional Indian thought with contemporary motivational psychology by connecting each Purushartha with modern psychological concepts:

Dharma with moral cognition, Artha with achievement motivation, Kama with affective neuroscience and attachment, and Moksha with mindfulness and self-actualization. The idea of the four Purushārthas—Dharma (moral obligation), Artha (material prosperity), Kāma (desire, pleasure), and Mokṣa (liberation)—has functioned as a comprehensive scheme of human life-goals in Indian philosophical traditions, directing social and individual behavior. In contrast to many Western motivational frameworks, which frequently arrange needs in a hierarchical manner (e.g. The Purushārtha model emphasizes a plurality of legacy, while the traditional Maslow's hierarchy of needs emphasizes drive reduction, goal-setting, or

self-determination from a psychological perspective, there are several ways to look at motivation: needs (drive-reduction, deficiency vs. growth), goals (achievement, mastery), self-determination (autonomy, competence, relatedness), and values (Schwartz's value theory). In contrast to a linear progression, the Purushārtha scheme emphasizes balance, integration, and dialectic tension among multiple life-ends. For example, material goals (Artha) or desire (Kāma) may occasionally clash with moral obligation (Dharma). Mokṣa's ultimate goal invites a transcendence of purely worldly interests and indicates the path to self-actualization and beyond. In contrast to Western motivational theories, there is still a dearth of psychological research on Purusharthas as motivational constructs despite this rich framework. Some research has started to put them into practice (for e.g. the instrument for measuring Purusharthas' four dimensions). In order to better understand human behavior in Indian and cross-cultural contexts, this paper aims to apply a psychological lens to Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha. It does this by examining how these concepts relate to individual motivation, how they can be empirically evaluated, and what implications they have.

Purpose

This paper's main goal is to examine the psychological significance of the Purushartha and their relevance to contemporary behavioural science. Modern theoretical frameworks are used to interpret each Purushartha: This paper conducts a psychological analysis of the four objectives: examining how each one embodies motivational forces, exploring their interconnections, and considering how they can contribute to current psychological theories regarding motivation and well-being. The goal is not solely to provide an exegesis of the philosophical tradition but to interpret it through a psychological lens, pinpoint areas of convergence with contemporary theory, and propose implications for both research and practical application. According to Wood's (2012) understanding, the Purushārthas create a progression from the lowest level of human aspiration (freedom) to the highest level of motives (desire). They are levels of human motivation that point from superficial desires toward freedom from

constraints and understanding of one's true nature, rather than merely a list of life objectives that are:

1. Dharma
 2. Artha
 3. Kama
 4. Moksha
- To explain each Purushārtha (Dharma, Artha, Kāma, Mokṣa) using modern theories of motivation (e.g. (g). drive/need models, achievement motivation, self determination theory, and self actualization/transcendence).
 - To examine how the Purushārtha paradigm provides a multifaceted, non-hierarchical model of human striving and how it resolves psychological conflicts and tensions between life goals (e.g., Dharma vs. Kāma; Artha vs. Mokṣa).
 - To demonstrate how this indigenous model may improve culturally sensitive motivation measurement in South Asian and multicultural contexts, advance cross-cultural psychology, and help decolonize psychological standards of "human motivation."
 - To find and compile the body of psychological empirical, theoretical, and conceptual literature that discusses motivation, values, well-being, and behavior in relation to the four Purusharthas (Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha).

Review of the Literature and Theoretical Context

By analyzing human goal-seeking behavior through the prism of the Purushartha framework and well-known Western motivational notions, this research presents a narrative, conceptual comparative review that blends Eastern and Western conceptions of human motivation. The review examines how these various traditions understand purpose, desire, duty, and fulfilment by synthesizing philosophical, psychological, and theoretical literature rather than offering empirical data. The research seeks to provide light on the similarities and differences between Western models of motivation, such as need-based, goal-oriented, and self-actualization theories, and concepts like Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha. This integrated approach advances a deeper theoretical understanding of motivation across various psychological and philosophical traditions and provides a culturally inclusive view on goal-directed behavior.

For a long time, Western psychological theories have attempted to elucidate the

mechanisms behind human motivation. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy posits that people evolve from fulfilling their physical and psychological requirements to attaining self-actualization. Similar to how drive-reduction and reinforcement theories (Hull, 1943; Skinner, 1953) define motivation as the pursuit of reward or the alleviation of stress, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) highlights autonomy, competence, and relatedness as intrinsic motivators.

Indigenous psychological models, like the Purusharthas, provide important insights into motivation, illustrating it as a multidimensional and culturally contextualized process, contrasting with theories criticized for their individualistic and linear approach. Cross-cultural research emphasizes the role of sociocultural context, moral values, and collective goals in shaping motivation (Berry et al., 2002).

The Purusharthic Framework

The Purusharthas, as outlined in ancient Indian texts like the Vedas and Mahabharata, define four key life goals:

Dharma– moral order, ethical duty, and social responsibility.

Artha– material prosperity, security, and success

Kama– pleasure, emotional satisfaction, and aesthetic enjoyment.

Moksha– liberation from attachment and realization of ultimate truth.

These goals are interconnected; Dharma guides Artha and Kama, while Moksha encompasses and transcends all three, forming a holistic framework for ethical, material, emotional, and spiritual motivation (Rao, 2014).

Indian Psychology and Motivation

Indian psychology (Cornelissen, 2006) emphasizes knowledge, tone- consummation, and inner harmony as core rudiments of cerebral development. provocation, from this perspective, is n't simply a function of need satisfaction but a process of balancing worldly engagement (Artha and Kama) with moral responsibility (Dharma) and spiritual growth (Moksha). This multidimensionality makes the Purusharthas an important frame for understanding provocation in both cultural and psychological terms.

Indian Thoughts on Purushārthas

In classical Hindu and related philosophical traditions, the term Purushārtha denotes the legitimate objectives or goals of human existence. These are typically listed as: Dharma (ethical duty, right conduct), Artha (wealth, prosperity, resources), Kāma (desire, pleasure, love), and Mokṣa (liberation, spiritual freedom). Scholars observe that Dharma is frequently viewed as the primary aim, directing the pursuits of Artha and Kāma, and ultimately paving the way for Mokṣa. The aims are intended to be interconnected rather than isolated or mutually exclusive, promoting a harmonious life. Some authors interpret these as indicative of stages or levels of motivation: for instance, desire (Kāma) leads to procurement (Artha), which in turn leads to duty/values (Dharma), culminating in transcendence (Mokṣa).

Psychological Theories of Motivation

In contemporary psychology, various frameworks elucidate the factors that drive human behavior:

- Need-based models, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which categorizes physiological, safety, belonging/love, esteem, and self-actualization needs in ascending order.
- Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, ...Year..) asserts that basic psychological needs include autonomy, competence, and relatedness.
- Value and goal theories highlight how individuals prioritize different categories of goals (e.g., achievement, pleasure, growth, transcendence).
- Positive psychology focuses on flourishing, well-being, meaning, and purpose (e.g., Seligman's PERMA model: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment).

Connecting the Two Traditions

The Purushārthas and Western psychological models have been compared by several writers. According to one study, for example, Mokṣa is associated with transcendence and self-actualization, Kāma with pleasure and connections, Artha with engagement and competence, and Dharma with purpose and worth. While Maslow suggested fundamental and growing needs, the Hindu system incorporates the idea of Mokṣa, an ultimate liberation that goes beyond conventional motivational models, according to another article

on morality and moral development in Hindu tradition. As a result, the Purushārthas provide a culturally rooted motivational schema that may be used to psychologically theorize about human purpose, life objectives, development, and well-being.

A Psychological Examination of Every Purushārtha

We now take a step-by-step look at each goal, analyzing it psychologically in terms of its developmental relevance, motivational role, value foundation, and well-being implications.

Dharma

Conceptual meaning: The term "dharma" can be rendered as "duty," "righteousness," "moral order," "ethical conduct," or "right way of living." It includes social/collective welfare as well as personal obligations.

Motivating role : From a psychology standpoint, Dharma is equivalent to value-based motivation, which is the desire to act in accordance with moral principles, higher values, and a purpose that goes beyond instant enjoyment. It could be thought of as a meta-motivation regulator that explains the "why" underlying behavior. When people act based on values rather than rewards from outside sources, it is consistent with intrinsic drive.

Implications for well-being: Positive psychology recognizes meaning and purpose as essential to well-being (e.g., Seligman's "Meaning" in PERMA), and acting in accordance with values (Dharma) contributes to these aspects. Value-consistency promotes integrity and lessens cognitive dissonance, both of which support psychological well-being. Furthermore, by establishing moral limits, Dharma moderates the possible excesses of Artha (wealth) and Kāma (desire).

The Artha

Artha's conceptual meaning includes material prosperity, wealth, means of subsistence, resources, security, and status. It encompasses both social/psychological and material/physical types of "wealth."

Motivational role: In terms of psychology, Artha is associated with extrinsic/instrumental objectives (e.g., achievement, status, economic security), competence-driven motivation, and the desire for material/resource stability that permits other

endeavors. It may be a reflection of motivating desires for social recognition, efficacy, and mastery.

Implications for well-being: Psychological well-being, such as a sense of control and self-efficacy, depends on having resources and competence. However, unchecked Artha can result in materialism, discontent, or an excessive focus on outward benefits in the absence of transcendence (Mokṣa) or ethical regulation (Dharma). From a motivational standpoint, obtaining Artha can lower well-being when it becomes a goal rather than a means (e.g., hedonic treadmill, relative deprivation).

Kāma

Conceptual meaning: Kāma encompasses both the sexual and more general psychosocial notion of yearning, as well as cravings, joys, love, aesthetic enjoyment, and emotional and sensory gratification.

Motivational role: In psychology, Kāma is associated with desire-driven motivation, hedonic motivation (seeking pleasure, avoiding pain), and relational and emotional motivations (intimacy, creativity, aesthetic fulfilment). It encompasses both the emotional aspect of human existence and instant fulfilment.

Implications for well-being: Emotional fulfilment and pleasure are critical to well-being (good emotions, relationships). However, the pursuit of Kāma alone can become self-indulgent, transient, and may result in unhappiness, addiction, or emptiness (echoing the hedonic vs. eudaimonic well-being dichotomy) if it is not tempered by values (Dharma) or meaning. Therefore, the Indian paradigm emphasizes regulating Kāma through Dharma and integrating it with higher goals rather than suppressing it.

Moksha – freedom

Mokṣa's conceptual meaning is "liberation, release, self-realization, and freedom from bondage" (especially the process of life and death and attachment). According to the motivational concept, Mokṣa is the ultimate goal that transcends material objectives.

The role of motivation: From a psychological standpoint, Mokṣa is equivalent to transcendence-motivation, which is the yearning for spiritual development, self-actualization, and purpose beyond ego. The goal is to conquer attachment, transcend simple desire, and achieve a condition of

liberation from motivational pull. Growth needs, existential motivations, Maslow's "peak experiences," and self-transcendence in later positive psychology are all possible alignments (see, for example, Maslow's "transcendence needs").

Implications for well-being: In many traditions, psychological well-being is closely linked to liberation from pain, attachment, and the ego-driven cycle (e.g., Flow, mindfulness, transcendent states). According to certain scientific research, spiritual well-being, self-transcendence, and meaning are powerful indicators of life satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a theoretical and comparative research design grounded in textual and conceptual analysis, integrating perspectives from traditional Indian philosophical sources and contemporary Western psychological theories of motivation. The methodological approach followed the principles of hermeneutic analysis (Gadamer, 1975) and conceptual synthesis (Walker & Avant, 2019), emphasizing the interpretation of meaning systems across cultural contexts.

Primary sources included classical Indian philosophical texts that articulate the *Purusharthas—Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha*—as foundational constructs of human motivation and ethical striving. These were analyzed alongside key Western motivational frameworks such as Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), and goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al., 2002). The comparative analysis sought to identify convergences and divergences between these systems regarding assumptions about self, morality, and well-being.

A qualitative textual analysis was conducted to interpret motivational constructs within each tradition, following established psychological methodologies for analyzing cultural meaning systems (Smith et al., 2013; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This involved thematic coding of motivational concepts, relational dynamics among the *Purusharthas*, and the psychological implications of moral and existential conflicts (e.g., *Dharma–Kama, Artha–Moksha* tensions). The analysis emphasized cultural validity (Berry et al., 2011) and emic-etic integration (Triandis, 1996), ensuring that indigenous concepts were interpreted within their own epistemological context while facilitating

meaningful dialogue with universal psychological theories.

The synthesis process followed a triangulation strategy (Denzin, 2012) combining philosophical exegesis, psychological theory comparison, and literature review to construct an integrated cross-cultural model of motivation. This approach allowed for the identification of multidimensional motivational processes—ethical, emotional, and existential—that underlie human striving across cultural contexts.

Findings and Discussion

Each Purushartha reflects a unique dimension of mortal provocation that aligns with ultramodern psychological constructs:

- **Dharma (Moral Obligation)** Corresponds to moral development, prosocial conduct, and ethical decision-making (Kohlberg, 1981). It governs the regulation of impulses and ensures that individual hobbies align with collaborative well-being.
- **Artha (Material Prosperity)** Relates to achievement provocation, thing exposure, and price systems (McClelland, 1961). It represents the seeking for capability, success, and profitable stability.
- **Kama (Pleasure and Desire)** Reflects affective and emotional confines of provocation, inking with attachment proposition (Bowlby, 1969) and affective neuroscience. It encompasses both sensitive delectation and emotional closeness.
- **Moksha (Spiritual Emancipation)** Parallels tone- fruition (Maslow, 1968), awareness, and preponderancy. It presents the ultimate state of tone mindfulness, freedom from attachment, and inner peace.

In order to comprehend human goal-seeking behavior, a comparison of the Purushartha framework with Western motivational theories reveals both conceptual convergence and philosophical variance. Scholars from all cultures acknowledge that human motivation is multifaceted and encompasses material, psychological, social, and existential issues. The Purushartha framework is consistent with Western theories like Maslow's hierarchy of requirements (Maslow, 1943) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which recognize that human desires

go beyond mere survival to satisfaction and significance. Despite these similarities, the ethical foundation of motivation reveals a crucial difference. Dharma has a crucial regulatory role in the Purushartha framework, guaranteeing that the pursuit of riches and pleasure is morally and socially appropriate (Sharma, 1999). Western theories of motivation, particularly early behaviorist and humanistic ones, have a tendency to maintain their ethical neutrality by emphasizing psychological development, performance, or personal fulfillment (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Even when moral behavior is mentioned, it is frequently viewed not as a fundamental driving concept but rather as a result of healthy development. Western motivational theories and the Purushartha framework both aim to explain human goal-seeking behavior, but they diverge greatly in terms of cultural presumptions, ethical orientation, and ultimate purpose. By providing a more comprehensive explanation of motivation that strikes a balance between material achievement, emotional health, moral duty, and transcendental meaning, a synthesis of these viewpoints can enhance modern psychology theory. In a globalized world that need culturally inclusive and morally sound theories of human motivation, this kind of integration is becoming more and more important.

Implications and Significance

According to the findings of many publications and literature reviews the Purusharthas can be utilized as a culturally grounded paradigm in applied psychology and research to better understand human motivation, its integration into modern psychology has important theoretical and practical implications, including culturally sensitive approaches to psychological assessment and treatment in multicultural and South Asian contexts. Ultimately, by promoting a more comprehensive and globally relevant knowledge of human motivation, reinterpreting the Purusharthas in light of contemporary behavioral research fosters the decolonization of psychological theory and practice.

Theory of cross-cultural motivation

A culturally grounded paradigm that enhances and supplements Western motivational theories is provided by the Purushārtha framework. It highlights that human motivation is about thier archical goals, ethical regulation, and ultimate

transcendence rather than just needs to be met. To prevent cultural bias and capture a wider range of human motivational variability, motivational psychology researchers should work more with non-Western frameworks.

Well-being and life objectives

Understanding the four objectives in applied psychology and positive psychology can assist clients or individuals in considering their life goals: Do they prioritize Artha or Kāma over Dharma (values) or Mokṣa (meaning/transcendence)? Therapeutic approaches, such as matching career (Artha) with values (Dharma), including enjoyable activities (Kāma) without being enslaved to them, and investigating greater meaning (Mokṣa), could assist people in integrating these goals.

Motivation regulation based on ethics

The Purushārthas' Dharma-regulation is echoed by psychological research, which emphasizes self-regulation of impulses, delayed gratification, and value congruence. For instance, materialistic values (excessive Artha) are associated with greater discomfort and lower well-being; controlling them through ethical principles may lead to better results.

Motivation's spiritual/transcendent component

It has been said that contemporary psychology ignores the spiritual aspect. Transcendence, emancipation, and self-realization—dimensions that are becoming more and more important—are explicitly highlighted by the Mokṣa goal (mindfulness, flow, self-transcendence research). Our comprehension of human flourishing beyond hedonia and achievement is enhanced by incorporating such reasons into psychological models.

Limitations

It is important to exercise caution when applying the Purushārtha framework across cultural contexts because it is derived from Hindu/Vedic traditions and may not map globally. There are few empirical psychological studies that directly test the Purushārthas; most mapping is conceptual. More systematic empirical research is required. People may pursue several goals simultaneously or in different orders, and the progression paradigm (Kāma → Artha → Dharma → Mokṣa) may oversimplify complicated motivational

pathways. In psychology study, the concept of Mokṣa (freedom) may appear mystical and difficult to operationalize; care must be taken when translating it into quantifiable constructs like self-transcendence.

Perspectives for Future Research

Create psychometrically sound tools to assess a person's attitude toward each Purushārtha (Dharma, Artha, Kāma, and Mokṣa) and investigate how it relates to motivation, psychological adjustment, well-being, and value orientation. Longitudinal studies to examine how people's motivational orientations change over the course of their lives, such as a movement from Kāma/Artha in early life to Dharma/Mokṣa in later life. Cross-cultural comparative research that investigate the existence of alternative culturally entrenched motivational schemas as well as if and how the Purushārtha framework operates in non-Indian cultural contexts. Studies that employ the Purushārtha framework as a lens for life planning or therapy, such as assisting clients in calibrating their goals across the four domains and evaluating results in terms of life satisfaction, well-being, meaning, and flow. Transcendence-motivation (Mokṣa) and its correlates (e.g., decreased attachment, self-transcendence, changed motivational networks) have been the subject of neuroscientific and experimental studies.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the Purushārtha framework offers a rich, culturally grounded lens to understand human motivation. When mapped onto contemporary psychological theories, it reveals how moral duty (Dharma), material goals (Artha), affective desire (Kāma), and spiritual freedom (Mokṣa) correspond to distinct yet inter-related motivational systems. The tensions among these goals mirror identity formation, self-regulation and life-course development. Embracing this model enhances motivational theory by providing a multidimensional, non-hierarchical structure and paves the way for culturally responsive research and practice in diverse global. The *Purusharthas*—Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha—represent a sophisticated and integrative framework for understanding human motivation that transcends the individualistic and hierarchical tendencies of Western theories. By encompassing ethical,

material, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, the Purusharthic model provides a holistic view of human striving. Reinterpreting these traditional Indian concepts through a modern psychological lens offers valuable insights for cross-cultural research, applied psychology, and the global decolonization of knowledge systems. Ultimately, the Purusharthic approach enriches the study of motivation by recognizing the coexistence of worldly engagement, moral duty, emotional fulfilment, and spiritual freedom as equally valid expressions of the human pursuit of meaning. The four aims of life in Indian thought—Dharma, Artha, Kāma, Mokṣa—offer a rich motivational schema that resonates with, and enriches, modern psychological theories of motivation and well-being. Each aim corresponds to a distinct motivational domain: desire/pleasure (Kāma), acquisition/means (Artha), values/duty (Dharma), and transcendence/liberation (Mokṣa). The dynamic interplay among them suggests a developmentally and ethically informed progression, from immediate gratification toward ultimate freedom. Psychological theory and practice can benefit by integrating this holistic schema—especially in contexts of life-goals, meaning, value regulation and spiritual motivation. Future empirical research is required to operationalise and test the model, but it holds promise for a more culturally inclusive, depth-oriented psychology of human motivation and flourishing.

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