

The Cognitive Stillness Protocol: A Psycho-Behavioral Framework for Sthitaprajnata (Equanimity)

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Abstract

Background. Pervasive burnout, existential dissatisfaction, and fragmented self-experience have become defining features of modern professional life, yet established interventions address symptoms more readily than their deeper self-referential roots.

Objective. This paper proposes a conceptual integration of Vedantic philosophy with contemporary cognitive-behavioral perspectives, offering a structured framework for cultivating Sthitaprajnata (equanimity).

Approach. Drawing on the Bhagavad Gita's principle of Nishkama Karma (action without attachment to outcome) and the Jnana Yoga tradition associated with Ramana Maharshi, the paper introduces the Cognitive Stillness Protocol, a four-stage developmental model organised around the classical Vak hierarchy of consciousness: Vaikhari, Madhyama, Pashyanti, and Para. The protocol rests on a two-part behavioral principle, namely sustained purposeful action combined with the deliberate, gradual reduction of ego-centric reward-seeking.

Contribution. We propose a theoretical correspondence between these stages and neuro-cognitive constructs associated with the Default Mode Network (DMN) as a hypothesis for future empirical testing. We further distinguish the protocol's structure from established interventions such as MBSR and ACT, and specify validated instruments for each construct the protocol claims to affect.

Conclusion. The model is presented as a conceptual and clinically suggestive framework. It identifies points of convergence with the existing contemplative-science literature and outlines the empirical work, including head-to-head comparative trials, required before any causal or mechanistic claims can be supported.

Keywords

Sthitaprajnata; Vak hierarchy; Default Mode Network; Nishkama Karma; contemplative neuroscience; equanimity

1. Introduction

Contemporary professional and personal life is widely described, in both popular and scholarly discourse, as marked by psychological alienation, professional burnout, and chronic existential dissatisfaction (Frankl, 1959). Despite extensive technological and informational access, many people report a fragmented sense of self and a deficit in sustained psychological stability (Baumeister, 1991). Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy have demonstrated success in symptom management (Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Hayes et al., 2012). Some scholars nonetheless argue that these approaches emphasise attentional adjustment over the deeper regulation of reward-seeking and self-referential cognition.

This paper asks whether classical Vedantic frameworks, specifically the Bhagavad Gita and the Jnana Yoga tradition associated with Ramana Maharshi, can be translated into operational psycho-behavioral constructs that generate empirically testable hypotheses about the cultivation of equanimity (Easwaran, 2007; Maharshi, 2002). These traditions are not themselves empirical science. They may nonetheless provide a conceptual foundation for falsifiable hypotheses about self-regulation once their claims are stated in behaviorally defined terms.

Central to the argument is a proposed correspondence between Nishkama Karma (selfless action), the Vedic hierarchy of consciousness (Vaikhari, Madhyama, Pashyanti, and Para; Subramuniaswami, 2003), and constructs associated with the Default Mode Network (DMN). The four-stage sequence and the two-line formula draw on Sarma (2026), which synthesises Ramana Maharshi's teaching of stillness (*summa iru*) with Nishkama Karma into an integrated path toward Sthitaprajnata. The present paper extends that synthesis by proposing a correspondence with contemporary neuro-cognitive constructs, a step not undertaken in the source text. Every such correspondence in what follows is a conceptual heuristic and a source of testable hypotheses, not a demonstrated neuroscientific finding. No neuroimaging data are presented anywhere in this paper.

The contribution here is not the established observation that meditation is associated with reduced DMN activity, which is cited rather than demonstrated (Brewer et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2013; Tomasino et al., 2012). It is the integration of Nishkama Karma, the Vak hierarchy, and contemporary cognitive-behavioral constructs into a single sequential four-stage framework, the Cognitive Stillness Protocol, together with an explicit and falsifiable set of hypotheses linking that sequence to DMN-related self-referential processing.

This is a conceptual and theoretical integration rather than an empirical study. It reports no new data, clinical trial, or neuroimaging results, and should be evaluated by the standards appropriate to theoretical scholarship: originality and coherence of synthesis, clarity of the resulting hypotheses, and transparency about their evidentiary

status. The paper also engages Vedantic and Sanskrit-derived concepts primarily as sources of psychological and behavioral constructs for contemporary cognitive-behavioral and contemplative-neuroscience audiences, rather than as a philological or hermeneutic study of those concepts in their own right.

The sections that follow examine the psycho-behavioral roots of existential distress, present the Vak hierarchy as a functional developmental framework, discuss convergences with existing contemplative-science research, and outline the empirical validation the protocol would require before it could be regarded as a clinically supported intervention.

2. The Cognitive Stillness Protocol: A Proposed Conceptual Mapping

To bring the Vak hierarchy into conversation with contemporary clinical science, we propose a correspondence between its four developmental stages and constructs associated with the Default Mode Network. We call this the Vak-DMN Integration Model. It is a heuristic intended to guide inquiry, not a claim of biological identity: the DMN is an emergent property of multiple interacting systems, and its reduction is one possible indicator of cognitive stillness rather than an exhaustive one.

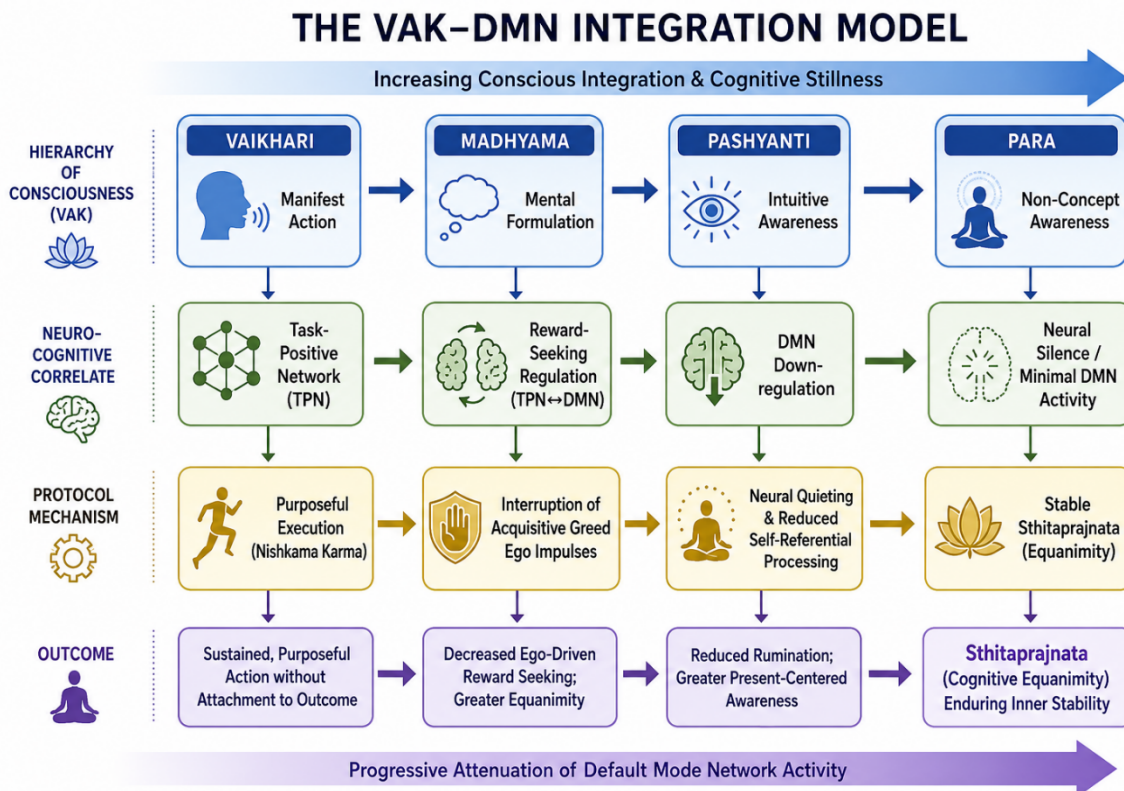


Figure 1. The Vak-DMN Integration Model (proposed conceptual mapping). The figure illustrates a hypothesized correspondence between the hierarchy of consciousness (Vaikhari, Madhyama, Pashyanti, and Para) and a proposed neuro-cognitive transition from Task-Positive Network (TPN) engagement toward Default Mode Network (DMN) downregulation. This mapping has not been empirically tested.

2.1 The Ordering Principle: Laya Krama

The four stages are not an arbitrary sequence, and the reason matters for what the framework claims. Classical Indian thought describes *vāk* as unfolding from the unmanifest toward audible speech, a movement of manifestation termed *śṛṣṭi krama*: *śakti* proceeding from the source (*Parā*) outward to the spoken word (*Vaikharī*). Contemplative practice inverts this movement. Beginning from manifest speech and action, the practitioner travels back through mental formulation and subtle vision toward the unmanifest source. This reverse movement, *laya krama*, is what the Tamil phrase *summa iru* names in the *Jñāna Yoga* tradition, and it supplies the protocol's ordering principle (Sarma, 2026).

The protocol therefore does not propose four stages because four is convenient. It proposes them because they are the canonical stages of manifestation taken in reverse, so the sequence *Vaikharī* → *Madhyama* → *Pashyanti* → *Para* is fixed by the underlying model rather than chosen by the present authors. A framework organised around a different number of stages would not be a variant of this proposal but a different claim about how self-referential cognition unwinds. The four stages are enumerated together in the *Lalitā Sahasranāma*, where *Parā*, *Paśyantī*, *Madhyamā*, and *Vaikharī-rūpā* appear in sequence (*nāmas* 366, 368, 370, and 371), and the underlying premise that a single power manifests in multiple forms is stated in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (6.8): *parāśya śaktir vividhaiva śrūyate*.

2.2 From Cognitive Stillness to Ethical Intelligence

Contemplative interventions are usually evaluated by symptom reduction and well-being. The Vedantic framework suggests a broader trajectory. Sustained cognitive stillness may reduce rumination and emotional reactivity while also creating conditions for enhanced reflective judgment and ethical discernment. The cognitive quieting described in the CSP framework may support the emergence of what traditional Indian thought calls *Sumathi*, or right-mindedness: a disposition marked by reflective awareness, responsible decision-making, long-term thinking, and value-congruent action. *Sumathi* has previously been operationalised as a foundational ethical outcome underlying technical mastery, providing the substrate on which skill acquisition rests (Sarma, Karra, & Bolla, 2026); the present paper treats it instead as a possible downstream consequence of sustained cognitive stillness.

In contemporary psychological terms, this trajectory may be read as enhanced metacognitive regulation rather than symptom reduction alone. As self-referential rumination diminishes, practitioners may become better able to evaluate situations with cognitive flexibility, long-term perspective, and value-congruent decision-making. *Sumathi* may therefore correspond broadly to mature reflective functioning and ethical reasoning, though this correspondence too remains conceptual.

2.3 Defining 'Ego-Centric Reward-Seeking'

The term 'ego-centric reward-seeking' is central to the two-line formula and recurs throughout the paper, so it requires a precise definition. We are not introducing a new psychological construct but specifying which existing, measurable constructs the term tracks.

The cascade this construct names is described in the Bhagavad Gita itself. Chapter 2, verses 62 and 63, trace a sequence beginning with dwelling on objects of the senses (*dhyāyato viṣayān*), which breeds attachment (*saṅga*), from which arises desire (*kāma*), and from thwarted desire anger (*krodha*), delusion (*sammoha*), confusion of recollection (*smṛti-vibhrama*), and finally the destruction of discriminative intelligence (*buddhi-nāśa*) (Easwaran, 2007). Read psychologically rather than metaphysically, this is a description of how outcome-fixation degrades judgment: the loss named here is the failure to recall one's own values under the grip of desire and its frustration, not a deficit of episodic memory. The protocol's *Madhyama* stage is intended to interrupt this sequence at its second link, before attachment consolidates into desire.

We define ego-centric reward-seeking as the subset of reward-motivated behavior that is externally contingent and ego-involved in the sense developed within self-determination theory: behavior performed primarily to obtain approval, status, or a separable outcome, or to protect a fragile or contingent sense of self-worth, rather than behavior that is autonomously valued or intrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In self-determination theory terms, the protocol targets external and introjected regulation. It does not target extrinsic motivation as such, nor identified or integrated regulation, which the theory associates with healthier and more sustainable functioning.

This distinguishes the target from healthy motivation. The protocol does not propose eliminating ambition or the pursuit of good outcomes. Someone who works hard because the work is meaningful, or who values an outcome for reasons independent of status or self-protection, is not engaged in the pattern the protocol targets, even if the work also produces rewards. The target is the narrower pattern in which the anticipated reward, or fear of its absence, is the proximate driver of both the behavior and the rumination surrounding it.

Defined this way, ego-centric reward-seeking maps onto constructs with existing validated instruments. Trait-level reward sensitivity can be assessed with the Behavioral Inhibition/Activation Scales (Carver & White, 1994) or the Sensitivity to Punishment and Sensitivity to Reward Questionnaire (Torrubia et al., 2001). Whether motivation for a given behavior is externally contingent or autonomously held can be assessed with self-determination theory's causality orientation measures (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The degree to which a person clings to outcomes can be assessed with the Non-Attachment Scale (Sahdra et al., 2010) or its short form, the NAS-7. We suggest that future work operationalise change in ego-centric reward-seeking as change across some combination of these instruments rather than an unvalidated, protocol-specific self-rating.

This definition narrows, and in places translates, the broader Vedantic sense of ego-attachment (*ahamkara*). No single Western construct fully captures the Sanskrit concept. We regard this as a necessary cost of operationalisation, stated explicitly so that future empirical work tests a specific claim rather than an ambiguous one.

The developmental progression proposed in the CSP parallels classical Indian models of transformative learning, which describe movement from *Jñāna* (knowledge) through *Manana* (reflective inquiry) and *Nididhyāsana* (deep assimilation) toward

Vijñāna (wisdom-in-action), a progression examined in detail elsewhere (Sarma & Karra, 2026). Though conceptually distinct from the four levels of Vak, both models describe a gradual shift from externally mediated cognition toward increasingly integrated awareness, a pathway through which knowledge becomes embodied insight.

Each stage below pairs a classical experiential definition with a hypothesized cognitive correlate and a protocol application.

2.4 Vaikhari (Externalized Speech / Sensory Action)

- **Definition:** the stage of spoken word and manifest behavior.
- **Hypothesized cognitive correlate:** engagement of goal-directed executive processes associated with the Task-Positive Network (TPN).
- **Protocol application:** consistent, purposeful professional engagement (Nishkama Karma) that emphasises the act of performing a task rather than its outcome.

2.5 Madhyama (Mental Formulation / Thought)

- **Definition:** the stage of internal thought, reasoning, and conceptualisation.
- **Hypothesized cognitive correlate:** the point at which ego-centric, reward-oriented cognition is generated and processed.
- **Protocol application:** practitioners are trained to notice and interrupt reward-seeking impulses as they arise, redirecting attention from ego-driven gain toward sustained equanimity.

Table 1. Protocol Mapping (Proposed, Untested)

Hierarchy (Vak)	Cognitive State	Proposed Neuro-Target	Protocol Function
Vaikhari	Manifest Action	Task-Positive Network	Purposeful Execution
Madhyama	Mental Processing	DMN Activation	Impulse Regulation
Pashyanti	Subtle Vision	DMN Downregulation	Neural Quieting
Para	Transcendent Awareness	Baseline Stillness	Cognitive Equanimity

Note. TPN = Task-Positive Network; DMN = Default Mode Network. All neuro-cognitive correspondences in this table are proposed hypotheses, not established findings.

2.6 Pashyanti (Intellectual Vision / Sustained Intuition)

- **Definition:** the stage of subtle thought, in which awareness is described as perceiving unity underlying disparate mental constructs.
- **Hypothesized cognitive correlate:** reduced self-referential, narrative-driven processing, a construct studied in relation to DMN activity in contemplative-practice research (Brewer et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2013) and supported by

meta-analytic evidence of consistent DMN reduction during meditation (Tomasino et al., 2012).

- **Protocol application:** a practice termed ‘neural quieting,’ in which discursive, self-centered thought is allowed to recede in favor of present-centered awareness.

2.7 Para (Transcendental / Non-Conceptual Awareness)

- **Definition:** a stage of pure, undifferentiated consciousness as described in the Vedantic sources.
- **Hypothesized cognitive correlate:** advanced contemplative states in expert meditators have been associated with reduced DMN activity and altered DMN connectivity (Brewer et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2013; Garrison et al., 2013). Whether Para corresponds to this same physiological pattern is an open empirical question.
- **Protocol application:** the intended end-state of the protocol, in which equanimity (Sthitaprajnata) is a stable disposition rather than a state requiring ongoing conscious effort.

A scope limit applies to this stage in particular. In the source tradition, Para carries a soteriological meaning, namely the realisation of and union with Paramātmā. That claim is metaphysical and lies outside what the present paper can address or assess. We treat Para here only in its psychological aspect, as a stable, non-effortful condition of awareness in which discursive self-referential activity has substantially subsided, and we make no claim about its ultimate ontological status. Readers approaching the framework from the source tradition should understand this as a deliberate narrowing for the purposes of empirical operationalisation, not as a denial of the wider claim.

Figure 2 translates this framework into an operational pathway, describing a hypothesized progression from existential distress and ego-centric reward-seeking toward greater equanimity through four sequential stages.

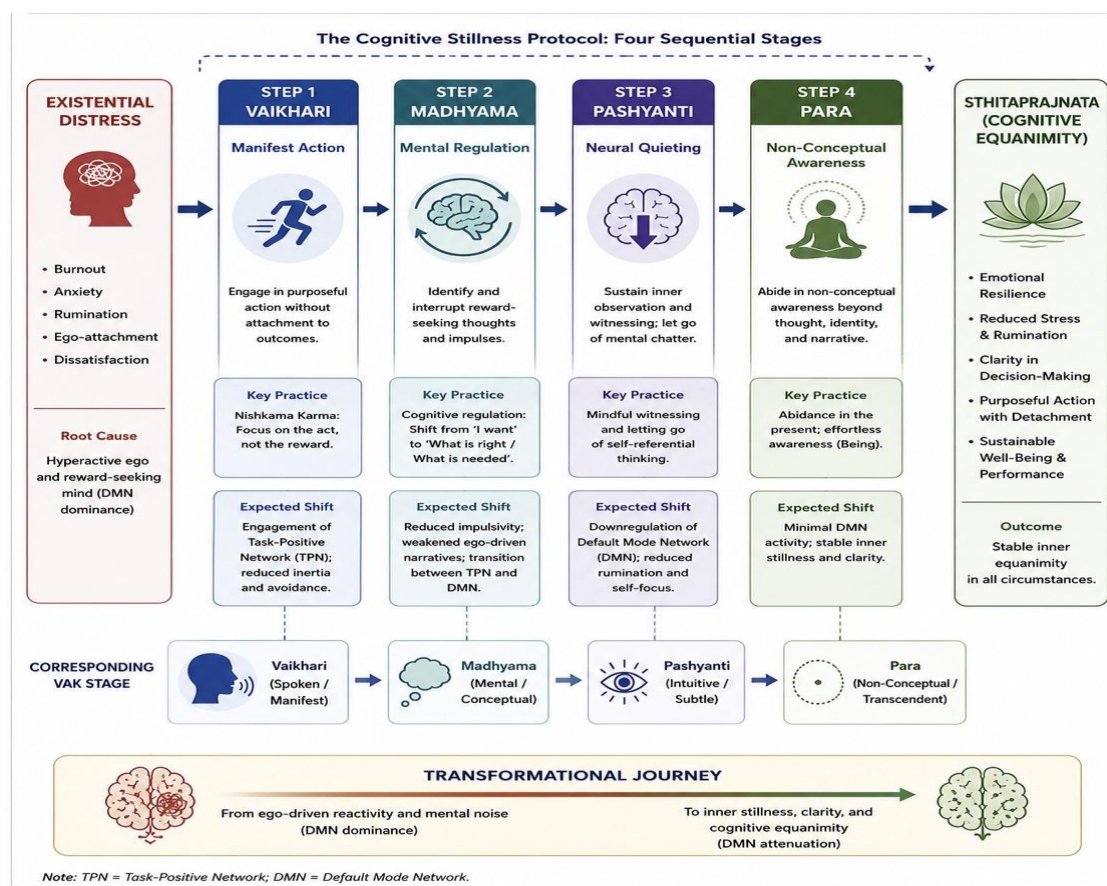


Figure 2. The Cognitive Stillness Protocol: a proposed four-stage developmental pathway from existential distress toward cognitive equanimity. The outcomes listed (e.g., reduced rumination, DMN downregulation) are hypothesized effects awaiting empirical evaluation.

3. Relationship to Existing Contemplative-Neuroscience Literature

The mechanisms proposed within the Cognitive Stillness Protocol are conceptually consistent with existing contemplative-neuroscience findings on self-referential cognition, though not derived from or validated by them. The Default Mode Network, a distributed network including the posterior cingulate cortex (PCC) and medial prefrontal cortex, is associated in the literature with rumination and self-referential thought (Raichle, 2015; Northoff et al., 2006). Brewer et al. (2011) found that experienced meditators showed decreased activity and altered connectivity in the PCC compared with novices. Taylor et al. (2013) extended this, reporting weaker functional connectivity between DMN regions involved in self-referential processing among long-term meditators relative to beginners. A meta-analysis by Tomasino et al. (2012) found DMN activity consistently reduced during meditation across a range of practices and study designs. Garrison et al. (2013), using real-time fMRI neurofeedback, linked moment-to-moment reductions in PCC activity directly to meditators' reports of present-centered, non-discursive awareness.

Altered Default Mode Network function is documented across a range of

neurological and psychiatric conditions, which is part of why the network is of clinical interest. The direction of alteration differs by condition, and this matters for any framework proposing DMN modulation. In major depression, the network shows hyperconnectivity associated with ruminative self-focus; in attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, the characteristic finding is a failure to suppress DMN activity during externally directed tasks. In Alzheimer's disease, by contrast, the posterior DMN shows early reductions in connectivity and metabolic activity alongside amyloid deposition, a pattern opposite in direction to the downregulation the present protocol proposes. We note this literature to indicate why the Madhyama-to-Pashyanti hypothesis is worth testing empirically, and explicitly not to suggest that the Cognitive Stillness Protocol prevents, slows, or treats any of these conditions. No such claim is made or supported anywhere in this paper, and the directional differences above are precisely why condition-specific evidence, rather than extrapolation from a general mechanism, would be required before any clinical application could be contemplated.

The Alzheimer's comparison also clarifies what kind of change the protocol proposes, and the distinction is worth stating directly. In neurodegenerative disease, reduced Default Mode Network activity reflects the progressive structural and metabolic degradation of network hubs by amyloid and tau pathology. The reduction is involuntary, unidirectional, and destructive of the network's regulatory capacity. What the Cognitive Stillness Protocol describes is categorically different: a trained, effortful, and reversible modulation of an intact network, in which the practitioner moves inward from Vaikhari through Madhyama toward Para and returns to externally directed engagement at will. Section 4.4 makes this explicit in proposing flexible modulation between the Task-Positive Network and the Default Mode Network rather than suppression of either. That such volitional modulation is possible is not speculative: Garrison et al. (2013) demonstrated moment-to-moment conscious modulation of posterior cingulate activity using real-time neurofeedback. Loss of capacity and voluntary exercise of a preserved capacity are distinct phenomena that happen to share a direction of change on a single measure, and conflating them would be an error.

Related work has examined how deliberate sensorimotor engagement, including structured vocal phonation, drives cortical plasticity and whole-brain synchronisation, and has noted Default Mode Network involvement in those effects (Sarma, Karra, & Upadhyayula, 2026). That review concerns embodied practice rather than the reduction of self-referential cognition at issue here, but it indicates that the neural correlates of classical contemplative techniques are open to empirical investigation.

We draw on this body of work as motivation for the hypothesis that the transition from Madhyama to Pashyanti might, if tested, show a similar pattern. We have not collected data to confirm it. This literature studies experienced meditators using established techniques, most often focused-attention or open-monitoring meditation, not the protocol proposed here. Generalising from those findings to the Cognitive Stillness Protocol is an inference, not a direct empirical result.

4. Clinical and Organizational Applications: A Proposed Framework

The applications below are proposed directions for pilot study and practice development. None has been evaluated in a controlled trial, and each should be read as a hypothesis rather than a demonstrated benefit.

4.1 Potential Clinical Applications

In clinical settings, for instance with patients experiencing generalized anxiety, burnout, or chronic dissatisfaction, the protocol could be piloted as a structured, non-pharmacological adjunctive practice.

- **Interrupting rumination:** the Madhyama-to-Pashyanti transition could give therapists a framework for helping patients identify reward-seeking or ego-driven thoughts before they escalate into rumination. This has not been tested in a clinical sample.
- **A structured alternative to general mindfulness instruction:** the four-stage Vak hierarchy offers a more concretely sequenced roadmap than some open-ended mindfulness instructions, which may aid patient engagement. That claim would need testing against standard MBSR or ACT protocols.

4.2 Potential Organizational Applications

In organizations characterized by high turnover, burnout, or short-term decision pressures, the protocol is proposed as a candidate framework for leadership development pilots.

- **Addressing short-termism:** the emphasis on reducing acquisitive, outcome-focused impulses is proposed as a potential systemic safeguard against short-term or ethically compromised decision-making. This remains a theoretical proposition without organizational outcome data.
- **Reframing professional tasks through Nishkama Karma:** by framing tasks as purposeful action independent of extrinsic reward, the protocol proposes a pathway toward more intrinsically motivated, sustainable engagement.

4.3 Scalability and Implementation

If validated, the protocol would be low-cost and scalable, requiring no specialised equipment. We propose the two-line formula as a daily heuristic: “Is my action purposeful, and am I noticing and reducing ego-attachment to outcome?” Whether this heuristic produces measurable change in well-being or performance is a question for future research.

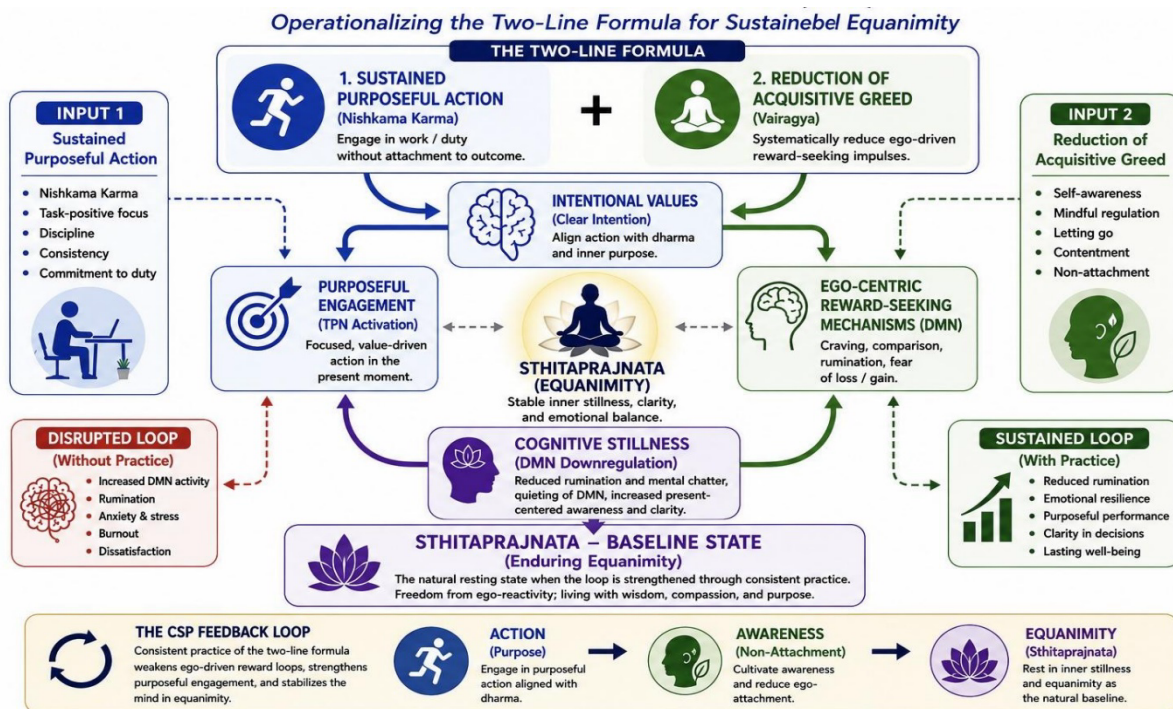


Figure 3. The Cognitive Stillness Protocol (CSP) feedback loop, a proposed systems-level description of how the two core behavioral inputs (sustained purposeful action and reduction of acquisitive reward-seeking) might interact over time. The loop is intended to guide future longitudinal study and has not been empirically validated.

4.4 Toward a Dynamic Equilibrium: Balancing TPN and DMN

Earlier sections emphasise the progressive reduction of maladaptive self-referential processing. The protocol is not, however, intended to minimise externally directed cognition. It proposes instead that psychological well-being depends on flexible modulation between internally regulated awareness and purposeful external engagement.

The Task-Positive Network (TPN) is broadly associated with goal-directed action and concentration. While it facilitates flow, a state of deep immersive engagement, it is also the network most susceptible to the “more-is-better” trap. Without conscious regulation, the TPN can drive a relentless pursuit of external rewards, which the occupational literature associates with professional burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) and, more broadly, with a deficit in sustained sources of meaning (Baumeister, 1991).

The DMN, often viewed primarily as a source of chaotic mind-wandering, functions as the brain’s narrative generator. The Cognitive Stillness Protocol proposes that applying the Vak hierarchy to the DMN allows practitioners to transform chaotic rumination into a scaffold for controlled internal simulation and sustained presence.

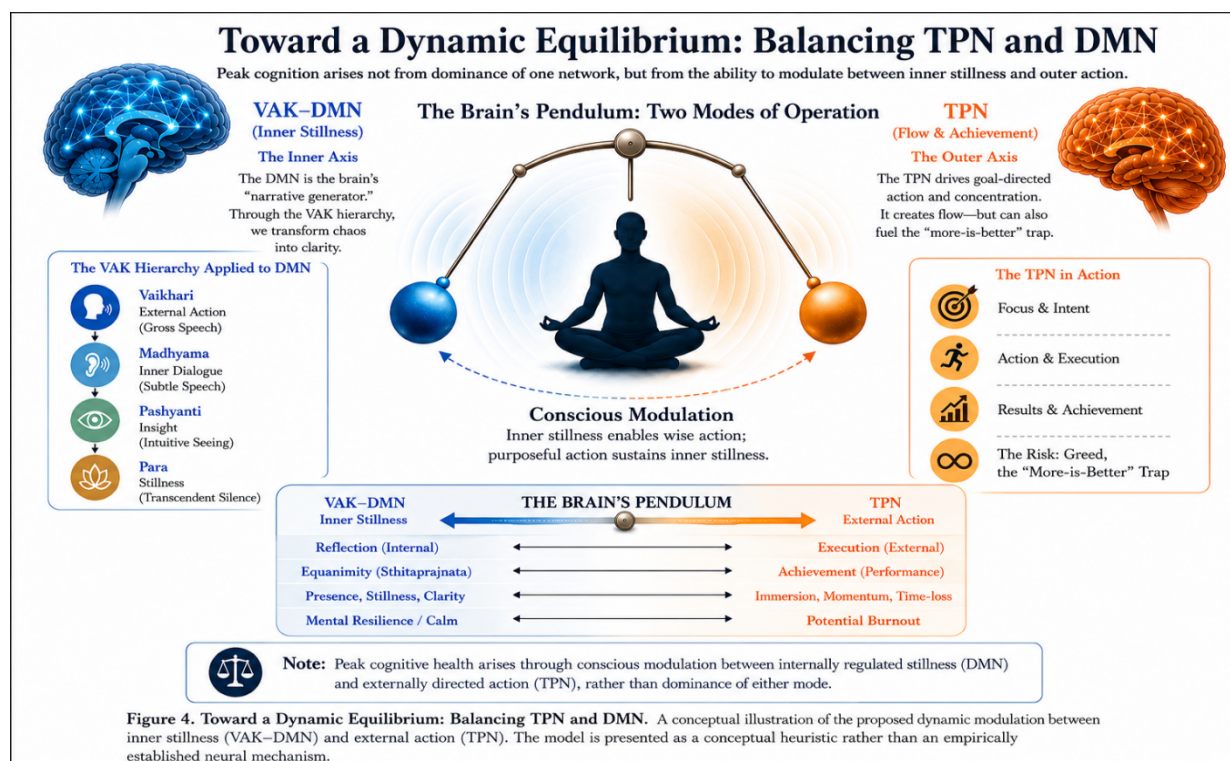


Table 2. The Brain's Pendulum: Two Modes of Operation

Feature	Vak-DMN (Inner Stillness)	TPN (Flow & Achievement)
Primary focus	Internal (simulation / reflection)	External (execution / action)
Cognitive goal	Equanimity (Sthitaprajnata)	Performance and achievement
Experience	Presence, stillness, clarity	Immersion, momentum, time-loss
The "shadow"	Uncontrolled mind-wandering	Greed; the "more-is-better" trap
Modern outcome	Mental resilience / calm	Potential burnout

Note. Peak cognitive health is proposed to arise through conscious modulation between internally regulated stillness (DMN) and externally directed action (TPN), rather than dominance of either mode. This equilibrium allows the practitioner to navigate both the field of action (Kshetra) and the witness of consciousness (Kshetrajna) with clarity.

Figure 4. The proposed TPN-DMN equilibrium underlying the Cognitive Stillness Protocol, illustrating the flexible modulation between externally directed engagement and internally regulated stillness described in Section 4.4.

5. Integration with Established Third-Wave Behavioural Therapies

The Cognitive Stillness Protocol shares conceptual ground with third-wave cognitive-behavioural therapies emphasising acceptance, mindfulness, and

metacognitive awareness, including Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Hayes et al., 2012) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Both emphasise non-reactive awareness and reduced identification with distressing thoughts, and both now rest on a substantial outcome-research base. A-Tjak et al. (2015) meta-analysed randomized controlled trials across clinically relevant mental and physical health problems and found that ACT outperformed control conditions at both posttreatment and follow-up. A related meta-analytic review reported a moderate overall ACT effect relative to control conditions (effect size = 0.42) (Powers et al., 2009). For MBSR, Khoury et al. (2015) meta-analysed 29 studies (N = 2,668) in healthy populations and found strong effects on stress reduction and moderate effects on anxiety, depression, and quality of life. An earlier meta-analysis across clinical and non-clinical samples (N = 12,145) reported comparably moderate-to-large effects on depression and anxiety (Khoury et al., 2013).

The present protocol differs from ACT and MBSR in proposing a more explicitly sequenced developmental pathway rooted in Nishkama Karma and the systematic reduction of acquisitive reward-seeking, rather than the attentional-training or acceptance-based processes that are the primary mechanisms in those interventions. Whether this added structure provides incremental benefit over existing ACT or MBSR protocols is an empirical question this paper does not resolve. A head-to-head randomized trial would be required to establish it.

A further gap concerns equanimity itself, which the protocol treats as its central outcome (Sthitaprajnata) but which Western psychology has only recently begun to operationalise. Desbordes et al. (2015) argued that equanimity has historically been under-specified in contemplative-science research and proposed defining it as an even-minded disposition toward experience regardless of affective valence, distinct from related constructs such as mindfulness or positive affect. Subsequent psychometric work produced the two-factor Equanimity Scale (EQUA-S), distinguishing even-mindedness from hedonic independence and showing convergent validity with non-attachment measures alongside negative correlations with psychological distress (Juneau et al., 2020). None of these instruments were used here. We flag their existence because future empirical tests of the protocol should adopt a validated equanimity measure such as the EQUA-S rather than the protocol's own non-validated self-rating items.

We hypothesize that the hierarchical Vak-based sequence may facilitate engagement pathways distinct from the more open-ended attentional training found in MBSR and ACT. Testing this would require head-to-head randomized controlled trials using validated instruments, such as the EQUA-S for equanimity alongside standardised measures of clinical symptom reduction, comparing the CSP directly against standard MBSR and ACT protocols.

6. Hypothetical Application Scenario (“Vikram”)

The following is a hypothetical, composite scenario illustrating how the four-stage Vak hierarchy might be applied in a professional coaching or developmental context. ‘Vikram’ is not an actual participant. No developmental application, informed

consent process, or data collection occurred. The scenario functions as a worked example for clarifying the protocol's stages and carries no evidentiary weight. It should not be read or cited as a case report, and we have deliberately avoided case-report conventions to prevent that misreading.

Hypothetical profile: a senior executive in a high-pressure financial firm, showing the chronic exhaustion, depersonalization, and outcome-anxiety commonly described in the burnout literature (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

6.1 Hypothetical Starting Point

The individual's internal experience is characterized by persistent, future-oriented rumination centred on outcomes, evaluation, and status, of the kind associated in the literature with elevated DMN activity and self-referential processing (Northoff et al., 2006; Raichle, 2015). No physiological measurement is implied. References to DMN states in this section illustrate the protocol's conceptual logic rather than describing measured brain activity.

6.2 Hypothetical Application of the Protocol

The sequence below walks through how the four stages might unfold over a notional twelve-week period. It is constructed for expository purposes and represents no data from any actual application or tracked individual.

- **Vaikhari:** the individual continues existing work responsibilities while practicing a shift in cognitive focus from outcome (e.g., bonus, evaluation) to process, meaning the purposeful execution of the task itself.
- **Madhyama:** when reward-seeking thoughts arise (e.g., 'I need this deal to boost my reputation'), the individual practices labelling them as transient cognitive impulses rather than acting on them automatically.
- **Pashyanti:** through repeated practice during lower-stakes tasks, the individual develops some capacity to observe anxiety as a secondary layer of experience rather than as central to the task at hand.
- **Para:** by the later weeks, the individual is depicted as experiencing reduced subjective distress during previously identified high-stress situations, such as board meetings, while maintaining task-relevant clarity.

6.3 What This Scenario Illustrates

We omit invented outcome statistics, such as a percentage change on a burnout measure, since numeric results for a hypothetical application risk being mistaken for empirical findings. The purpose is narrower: to show how the four Vak stages could be sequenced in practice, and to make the two-line formula concrete as a daily heuristic.

Because it describes no real individual, measurement, or control condition, the scenario offers no evidence about whether the protocol works. Any apparent plausibility reflects the construction of the example. Empirical evaluation would require real participants, validated instruments such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the EQUA-S, and a controlled design, as set out in Section 7.

7. Limitations

The Cognitive Stillness Protocol is a conceptual framework requiring substantial empirical validation before any clinical or organizational claim can be supported. The following limitations are the most consequential.

- **Untested neuro-cognitive mapping:** the proposed correspondence between the Vak hierarchy and DMN activity has not been tested using fMRI, EEG, or any other neuroimaging or physiological method.
- **No empirical case data:** the vignette in Section 6 describes no real individual, measurement, or intervention, and provides no evidence of the protocol's effects.
- **Absence of standardized measurement:** no validated psychometric instruments were administered. Future work should incorporate them from the outset.
- **No therapeutic or preventive claim:** although Section 3 notes that Default Mode Network alterations occur in several clinical conditions, the protocol has not been tested in any clinical population, and nothing in this paper supports its use to prevent, slow, or treat any disease. The directional differences between conditions make extrapolation from the general mechanism particularly unsafe.
- **No comparison to existing interventions:** the paper does not compare the protocol's effects with ACT or MBSR, so any claim of relative advantage remains speculative.
- **Generalizability:** the paper presents no empirical data, only a conceptual framework and a hypothetical vignette. Randomized controlled trials with diverse cohorts are necessary before any claim about the protocol's effects in any population could be supported.

7.1 Why These Four Stages, and Why This Network?

The four-stage structure itself is not arbitrary. As set out in Section 2.1, it is the classical order of manifestation taken in reverse, so the sequence is fixed by the source tradition rather than selected by the present authors (Subramuniaswami, 2003; Sarma, 2026). What that argument does not settle is the choice of neural system, and this limitation deserves direct treatment rather than a passing mention.

The DMN is the network most studied in relation to self-referential thought and rumination (Raichle, 2015; Northoff et al., 2006), which makes it a natural candidate for the Madhyama stage. Self-referential processing is not produced by the DMN alone, however. Other large-scale networks, including the salience network and the frontoparietal control network, are also implicated in emotion regulation and attentional control, and we have no basis for ruling out their equal or greater relevance to the stages described here.

The correspondence between Madhyama and DMN-related processing is therefore a plausible hypothesis motivated by conceptual similarity, since both involve

internally generated self-referential mental content. It is not a finding derived from comparing competing models. Resolving the question would require a study that tests the Vak–DMN mapping against at least one plausible alternative network model rather than testing it in isolation, since a finding of DMN involvement alone could not rule out other networks playing an equal or larger role.

7.2 Proposed Measurement Strategy

Table 3 proposes a specific validated instrument for each construct the protocol claims to affect, so that the framework is immediately testable. None of these instruments was administered in the present paper.

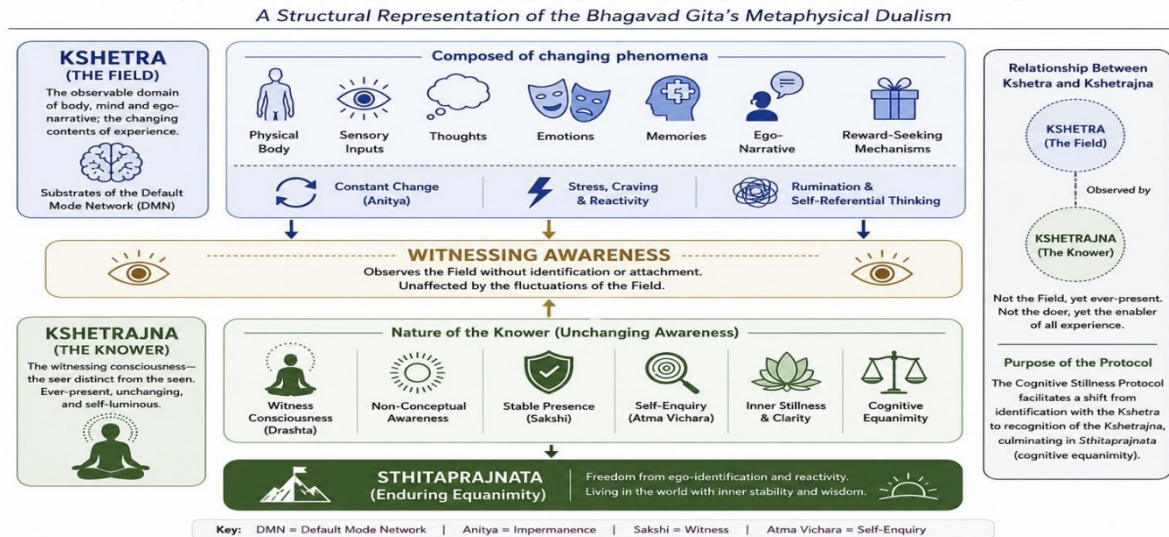
Table 3. Proposed Measurement Strategy for Future Empirical Evaluation

Construct	Proposed Instrument	Source
Burnout	Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)	Maslach & Jackson (1981)
Equanimity	Equanimity Scale (EQUA-S)	Juneau et al. (2020)
Rumination	Ruminative Response Scale (RRS)	Treynor et al. (2003)
Non-attachment	Non-Attachment Scale, short form (NAS-7)	Elphinstone et al. (2015); Sahdra et al. (2010)
Reward-seeking (trait)	BIS/BAS Scales; SPSRQ	Carver & White (1994); Torrubia et al. (2001)
Reward-seeking (autonomy)	Causality Orientations Scale	Ryan & Deci (2000)

Note. Each instrument listed is an existing, independently validated measure; none was administered in the present paper.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) is proposed for burnout as the most widely validated instrument in the occupational literature, with established subscales for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal

accomplishment. The EQUA-S (Juneau et al., 2020) is the most directly relevant



validated equanimity measure, designed specifically to distinguish equanimity from general mindfulness. The Ruminative Response Scale (Treynor et al., 2003) would allow a direct test of whether the protocol reduces ruminative thought, the specific mechanism claimed for the Madhyama-to-Pashyanti transition. The NAS-7 (Elphinstone et al., 2015), a short form of the Non-Attachment Scale (Sahdra et al., 2010), would test whether reduced outcome-attachment is reflected in that validated construct. For reward-seeking, the BIS/BAS Scales (Carver & White, 1994) and the SPSRQ (Torrubia et al., 2001) jointly capture the trait-level component defined in Section 2.3, while causality-orientation measures from self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) capture the externally contingent versus autonomous distinction central to that definition.

A minimally adequate empirical test would administer this battery, or a comparable one, before and after a defined intervention period, ideally with an active control condition such as a standard MBSR or ACT protocol alongside a waitlist or treatment-as-usual comparison. Effect sizes should be reported for each construct independently rather than as a single composite, since the protocol makes claims about several distinguishable constructs. An active control is essential to establish that any observed effect is specific to the four-stage Vak mechanism rather than to general meditative practice.

8. Conclusion

This paper has proposed the Cognitive Stillness Protocol as a conceptual framework drawing on Vedantic philosophy, specifically Nishkama Karma and the Vak hierarchy of Vaikhari, Madhyama, Pashyanti, and Para, to describe a possible pathway toward equanimity (Sthitaprajnata). We have proposed a theoretical correspondence between these stages and constructs from contemplative neuroscience, particularly the Default Mode Network, as a source of hypotheses for future empirical work.

The framework's philosophical foundation can be further understood through the

Bhagavad Gita's distinction between the Kshetra (the Field) and the Kshetrajna (the Knower), illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5. The Kshetra–Kshetrajna conceptual framework, after the Bhagavad Gita's distinction between the Field (body, mind, ego-narrative) and the Knower (witnessing consciousness). This figure is a philosophical illustration of the protocol's framing and does not represent empirical or neuroimaging data.

The significance of cognitive stillness may extend beyond clinical symptom reduction. By reducing ego-centric mental activity and fostering metacognitive awareness, sustained contemplative practice may support the development of reflective judgment and ethical intelligence. Future research might therefore investigate whether the outcomes associated with cognitive stillness include not only improvements in well-being but measurable changes in decision-making quality, value congruence, prosocial behavior, and other indicators of mature psychological functioning.

The contribution of this paper is conceptual rather than empirical. By integrating Nishkama Karma, the Vak hierarchy, and contemporary cognitive-behavioral constructs into a single developmental framework, the Cognitive Stillness Protocol provides a coherent set of falsifiable hypotheses about the cultivation of equanimity. Future research should evaluate it through randomized controlled trials, standardized psychometric assessment, and neuroimaging studies comparing the proposed Vak–DMN framework with alternative cognitive-network models. Only such work can determine whether the protocol offers measurable advantages beyond existing contemplative and behavioral interventions.

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