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*This study examined the health consequences of an indigenous concept "Anāsakti" which means non-attachment. The scale measuring anāsakti was based on the characteristics of a man of steady wisdom "the sthūtaprajña", described in the Bhagavad Gītā. It was hypothesised that those high on anāsakti would experience less distress and exhibit fewer symptoms of strain when faced with stressful life events. Results showed that anāsakt subjects were less distressed and exhibited fewer symptoms of ill health. Anāsakti was also found to be the most significant predictor of strain symptoms.*

## **Anāsakti and Health: A Study of Non-attachment**

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**The study reported** in this paper attempts to integrate the indigenous spiritual concept of Anāsakti or non-attachment with the tradition of scientific psychological investigation of the stress process. Despite certain fundamental differences between the two traditions, an attempt has been made to look at a concept which is rooted in transpersonal theory, through the eyes of an empirical investigator. There were two reasons for making this attempt. First, was a desire to salvage psychologically relevant indigenous concepts from the intellectual abyss to which they were condemned by the rigid Newtonianism of the so-called mainstream scientific psychology. The study of anāsakti demonstrated the possibility of such reclamation. Second, was a need to empirically examine the intuitively felt significance of anāsakti for health. This study investigated the role of anāsakti in the stress process because control of emotion and emotional equilibrium are integral components of anāsakti. The meaning of anāsakti will be discussed in greater detail later.

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This study embodies transition of thoughts across distinct theoretical frameworks. Concepts belonging to the domains of philosophy, mysticism and psychology have all been invoked with the aim of understanding the stress process. The seeming theoretical inconsistency may be viewed as an initial step towards achieving a dynamic synthesis of these different streams of knowledge.

Although most indigenous systems are traditional, their interpretation in terms of contemporary language and vocabulary is a distinct possibility (Paranjpe, 1988). Since the process of indigenisation also refers to indigenisation of research methodology, skepticism regarding the appropriateness of adopting empirical methods to understand indigenous concepts which may not lend themselves to their operationalistic orientation, is not unwarranted. Nonetheless, the decision to studying indigenous concepts with the help of empirical methods can be taken. At a stage where "...indigenisation has hardly passed beyond the embryonic stage of development..." (Ho, 1988, p. 54), this decision may be less appropriate but more strategic. It may encourage the advocates of empiricism to look for concepts embedded in their own cultural heritage and in the process, it may save those ancient texts from being subjected to the iconoclastic destruction by the present day nihilism, the "materialistic scientism" (Schumacher, 1977, p. 4).

Before working out the implications of anāsakti in the stress process, a brief description of the philosophical framework of anāsakti will be presented here.

According to almost every system of Indian philosophy, whether orthodox or heterodox, realistic or idealistic, the purpose of human life is to achieve liberation from sufferings and realise the identity of self with the Ultimate Reality. To be able to achieve the goal of self-realisation, disengagement of consciousness from desires is necessary. Desires, which are directives of the senses, spring from the identification of self with the ego and its concerns of ambition, pride, attachment (āsakti) and insistence on mineness (mamatva). For this study, description of anāsakti given in the *Bhagavad Gītā* was examined. The reason for selecting the *Bhagavad Gītā* over other sources was simple. The *Bhagavad Gītā* describes anāsakti in great thoroughness and works out the various conceivable ramifications of the concept in all their details.

In the *Gītā*, the ideal of anāsakti embodies the principles of spiritualism as well as exhortations to pragmatism and action orientation.

Anāsakti (the end state) has been explained in terms of anāsakt action or 'niskamakarma' (which implies to achieve that end state). Anāsakt action does not refer to physical abstention from activity. It is an intense, though disinterested action, performed with a spirit of dispassion, without nurturing concerns about success or failure, loss or gain, likes or dislikes. This results in a complete unification of the actor with the act and a consequent task excellence. According to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, task excellence comes about only when the actor has understood that his concerns lie only in actions and not in their results, that actions should not serve any personal motives and that these cognitions should not imply inaction. Being wedded to the piece of work at hand only implies that while an individual is at work, he is not allowing his abilities to run to waste in mental preoccupations and fears pertaining to the results and consequences. Such an attitude towards work significantly affects the emotional response to success and failure. Following the relinquishment of desires, mental serenity is acquired and the individual maintains greater emotional equipoise in the face of consequence, be it good or bad, desirable or undesirable. In other words, by way of recommending commitment and total absorption in the task, the doctrine of anāsakt action offers an excellent way by which our worldly endeavours can become more effective.

Although anāsakti is extolled as an ideal by the Indian philosophical and mystical literature, yet it is manifested through common cultural expressions such as popular songs, idioms, phrases and folklores. Depending upon the variety and breadth of their exposure to this ideal, people manifest anāsakti in their day-to-day lives without perhaps being aware of its underlying metaphysical meaning. Since personality dispositions are partly conditioned by the dominant inputs contained in a given culture, anāsakti is conceptualised as a multifaceted personality construct consisting of a set of beliefs, attitudes and cognitions consistent with the essence of the ideal.

The causal linkage between anāsakti and health can now be explicated. It can be argued that the doctrine of anāsakt action conveys a message which is central to coping with life stressors. This argument is based on the psychological literature which demonstrates the significance of cognitive and attitudinal systems in determining the manner in which stress inducing situations are confronted (Pearlin, Liberman, Menaghan, & Mullan, 1981).

The distinctive characteristics of *anāsakti* are effort orientation, emotional equipoise in the face of success and failure, a relatively weak concern for obtaining extrinsic rewards, and an intense effort to achieve excellence. Therefore, those high on *anāsakti* are expected to experience lesser distress and exhibit fewer symptoms of strain. These arguments will be extended on the basis of conjectures and empirical evidence.

Frankl (1963) stated that people engage in an active search for meaning even in their sufferings. While studying the nature of stressors and coping strategies of the physically handicapped children, Srivastava (1981) noted that in spite of the various disadvantages that the physically handicapped children face, they still view their own condition and that of their fellow beings more positively. It is also seen that commitment to some higher goal in life enables people to meaningfully reconstruct even those experiences which can be described as damaging. In the light of these facts, *anāsakt* action seems to offer an important coping resource. It may be reaffirmed here that *anāsakt* action is not without a goal, rather it has a very definite goal—the goal of self-realisation. In performing actions in an *anāsakt* manner, the more familiar and common goals are subordinated to the less familiar and less common ones. This results in recognising the spiritual value of action in addition to its material significance. If the goal is fixed inwards, the emotional impacts of external success and failure are minimised. Once this happens, the consequences—good or bad—will be cognised as milestones in the path to self-realisation rather than as reflections of personal capabilities.

One who has been able to relieve himself of the anxieties pertaining to success or failure can apply himself to any task more effectively as compared to others. An *anāsakt* person would perhaps be more effective in pursuing material goals also. For example, a student high on *anāsakti*, will not let the anxieties about success or failure distract him when he is preparing for the examination. The energy thus conserved, would be directed to the task at hand and, therefore, he would be able to perform his task with reasonable excellence. Since outcome concerns do not govern his actions, he would be able to maintain greater emotional equipoise in the face of success or failure and evaluate the causes of his failure more dispassionately.

These conjectures have empirical support. Zaffy and Bruning (1966) have suggested that anxiety causes individuals to attend to fewer cues in solving a problem. Easterbrook (1959) has stated that the number of cues utilised in any situation tends to become smaller with increase in emotion. This emotional arousal gets exaggerated when the individual starts ruminating about those ideas which may be totally irrelevant to the task, such as, his psychological state. As a consequence, the individual starts attending to the autonomic activity which is thus generated only to show poorer task performance (Mandler, 1982).

Brown (1980) has argued that while reacting to stressors, certain kinds of intellectual processes form a sequence to exacerbate distress. They refer to the manner in which an individual interprets the disparity between his expectations and perception of an event. This interpretation might lead to various kinds of perceptual distortions, unconscious defenses and attentional problems. Thoits (1984) has pointed out that emotions have a major role in the stress process and that the techniques adopted for emotion management can alter the perception of stressors as well as coping strategies.

Since these intrusive cognitions and emotional excitations are crucial in the reaction to stressors, it can be argued that greater concentration and absorption in the task at hand will eliminate task-irrelevant thoughts such as anticipations about the nature of outcomes. This will perhaps result in task excellence. On the other hand, emotional stability acquired through mentally dissociating oneself from the outcome will protect the individual from emotionally succumbing to the experience of failure. Therefore it seems that anāsakti will help the individual in such a way that he does not perceive life events as stressors. It may also serve as a significant "resistance resource" (Antonovsky, 1980) and increase his physical and psychological resistance to distress.

The following hypotheses were formulated for this study.

In the case of subjects high on anāsakti compared to those low on it:

1. The mean of distress ratings given in stressful life events would be smaller.
2. The mean of strain scores would be smaller.

## Method and Procedure

### Sample

The data were collected on 465 adults in the age range of 30–50 years with minimum education up to matriculation level. Of these subjects, 230 were males and 235 were females. The males represented various professional groups such as doctors, engineers, lawyers, businessmen as well as those employed in public sector undertakings. The mean age of males and females were 38.14 and 32.44 years, respectively.

### Instruments

*The Measure of Anāsakti.* A scale measuring anāsakti was developed to assess the degree to which people show anāsakti in the conduct of their daily lives. The scale (in Hindi) consisted of 28 items which were based on the description of “sthitaprajña” (a man of steady wisdom) given in the *Bhagvad Gītā*. These items were related to five factors of anāsakti. These factors were: Outcome Vulnerability, Attachment, Effort Orientation, Endurance and Equipose; and Physical-Sensual Non-identification. Subjects were asked to report the extent to which behaviour described under each item was applicable to them on a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 (not at all applicable) to 5 (entirely applicable). The minimum and maximum anāsakti scores were 28 and 140, respectively. Details relating to the construction of this scale are reported elsewhere (Pande, 1990).

*The Measure of Stress.* The stress scale used in this study included 76 items which covered major events as well as minor ongoing hassles. These items were grouped in the following categories of stressors: Stressful Events, Ongoing Stressors, Financial, Health of Others, Bereavement, Work/Occupational, Interpersonal, Ego, Family, Separation, Personal Setbacks, and Major Changes. Subjects were required to report events during the past one year. A 5-point rating scale was provided for each item. Subjects used this scale to indicate the extent to which they had experienced distress when a

given event occurred in their lives. The scale points were 1 (no distress at all), 2 (a little distress), 3 (average distress), 4 (much distress), and 5 (too much of distress).

*The Measure of Strain.* A symptom checklist-cum-rating scale to assess ill health was used. The scale comprised 45 items; some of these items were taken from a health scale constructed by Caplan, Naidu and Tripathi (1984), while others were framed to assess the mental and psychological health of subjects. These items were related to nine factors of strain which were: Depression, Physical Vitality, Positive State, Self-Image, Anger, Digestion, Flu, Sleep-Lethargy, and Inadequacy. Subjects were asked to indicate on a 4-point rating scale, how often they had experienced each of the symptoms in the past two weeks. The scale points were: 1 (did not happen at all), 2 (happened on a few occasions), 3 (happened many times), and 4 (continued for almost all the time). The minimum and maximum strain scores were 45 and 180, respectively.

### **Computation of Anāsakti, Stress and Strain Scores**

Anāsakti scores were obtained by summing the ratings given by the subjects to all 28 items of the scale of anāsakti. Reverse scoring was done for items which were negatively rated.

For each subject, three stress scores were computed. The Simple Stress Score (SSS) was obtained by counting the number of stressful life events experienced by the subject. Of the three stress scores, this was the most objective score of stress. The Weighted Stress Score (WSS) was obtained by summing the distress ratings given by the subject to the events which he/she had experienced. This score was a function of both the objective count of events and subjectively perceived intensity of distress. It was a composite score of both the environmental event and subjective perception. The Average Distress Rating (ADR) was obtained by dividing the WSS by the number of events experienced or SSS. It yielded a measure of the average amount of subjectively perceived distress across the endorsed items. Of the three stress scores, this was the most subjective score, the purest measure of subjectively perceived distress.

The strain score of each subject was derived by summing the ratings which he/she gave to 45 strain symptoms included in the

strain measure. Reverse scoring was done for items indicative of the subject's well-being.

## Results

This paper reports a part of the data of a larger study which investigated the moderator role of anāsakti in the stress process. In this section, data pertaining to the correlation between the measures of stress, strain and anāsakti, comparison of the means of these variables of two extreme anāsakti groups and the identification of predictors of strain will be presented.

### Correlations between Stress, Anāsakti and Strain

Correlations were computed between stress, anāsakti and strain scores. The coefficients of correlation between SSS, WSS, ADR, anāsakti and strain have been presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
Coefficients of Correlation between SSS, WSS, ADR, Anāsakti and Strain  
*n* = 465

	SSS	WSS	ADR	AS	Strain
SSS	—				
WSS	.94**	—			
ADR	.22**	.46**	—		
AS	-.08	-.12**	-.14**	—	
Strain	.29**	.33**	.26**	-.39**	—

Note: SSS is Simple Stress Score; WSS is Weighted Stress Score; ADR is Average Distress Rating; AS is Anāsakti; \*\**p* < .01.

The three stress scores, i.e., SSS, WSS and ADR were correlated positively with each other. Subjects who encountered greater number of stressful life events, gave higher distress ratings and on an average felt more distressed. A very high correlation between SSS and WSS ( $r = .94$ ) was obtained because the computation of WSS was dependent upon SSS, WSS or the sum of distress ratings

of events endorsed constituted SSS. In comparison to the correlation between SSS and ADR ( $r = .22$ ), a higher correlation was obtained between WSS and ADR ( $r = .46$ ) because both WSS and ADR were related to the perception of distress.

Anāsakti was significantly correlated with WSS and ADR but not with SSS. This implied that a higher degree of anāsakti was related to the perception of lower distress. Compared to the three stress scores, anāsakti had the highest correlation with strain.

In order to make comparisons between SSS, WSS, ADR and strain scores of subjects who were high and low on anāsakti, criterion groups of anāsakti were identified. Subjects whose anāsakti scores were below 104 (30th percentile of the frequency distribution of anāsakti scores) were included in the low anāsakti group and those who had scored above 118 (70th percentile) were included in the high anāsakti group.

#### Significance of Difference between Means of Stress and Strain Scores of Criterion Groups

Means of SSS, WSS, ADR and strain scores were derived for high and low anāsakti groups and significance of difference between means was tested.

Table 2

Means of SSS, WSS, ADR and Strain Scores of the Criterion Groups

	High Anāsakti Group ( $n=117$ )		Low Anāsakti Group ( $n=115$ )		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
SSS	12.12	8.42	12.09	8.12	.03	n.s.
WSS	36.77	29.41	40.29	29.22	.91	n.s.
ADR	2.89	.951	3.23	.890	2.83	<.01
Strain	71.75	15.12	91.01	23.96	7.29	<.01

The analysis revealed that the two groups were almost identical on mean SSS and there was a non-significant difference between the means of WSS of the two groups in the expected direction. Thus WSS failed to reveal a significant difference probably because it was very highly correlated with SSS. The non-significant difference

was perhaps a weak pointer towards differences in the manner in which these two groups perceived life events. This feature was brought out more clearly in ADR which was a purer measure of the perception of distress. ADR was significantly lower in the case of subjects who were high on anāsakti compared to those who were low on it.

The capacity of the high anāsakti group to cope with stressors and experience less distress was reflected in the process of somatisation also. Subjects high on anāsakti exhibited fewer symptoms of strain compared to those who were low on anāsakti.

### Identifying Predictors of Strain

A simultaneous multiple regression analysis was done to determine the relative significance of anāsakti and stress scores in predicting strain. Since SSS and WSS were strongly correlated ( $r=.94$ ) only WSS was entered in the regression equation along with ADR and anāsakti.

**Table 3**  
*Multiple Regression Analysis for Total Sample: Anāsakti, WSS and ADR as Independent Variables, Strain as Dependent Variable*

Variables	r	B	Beta	STD Error B	F
Non-attachment	-.39	-.547	-.348	.064	72.20 <sup>xx</sup>
WSS	.33	.186	.253	.034	30.50 <sup>xx</sup>
ADR	.26	2.08	.089	1.078	3.74*
Multiple R	.497				
R Square	.245				
F (3,461)	49.89 <sup>xx</sup>				

Note: <sup>xx</sup> $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ .

It can be seen from Table 3 that anāsakti had a significant but negative regression coefficient. Anāsakti and stress scores accounted for almost 25% of variance in the strain score. The contribution of these three predictors was found to be statistically significant [ $F(3,461) = 49.89$ ,  $p < .01$ ]. All the three predictor variables significantly contributed to prediction of strain. Comparing the beta coefficients it can be tentatively suggested that of the three predictors, the contribution of anāsakti was higher in predicting strain than the contribution of WSS and ADR.

## **Discussion**

The concept of anāsakti in the spiritual lore means progressive detachment of consciousness from the psycho-physical apparatus. Patanjali's and Shankaracharya's systems envisage five stages of development of consciousness of one who is pursuing the spiritual goal. These five stages are termed "Panchakosha" or five sheaths (Swami Ram, Ballentine, & Swami Ajay, 1976). The concept of "panchakosha" has a logical consequence for psychology. To understand the experience and behaviour of people in the five different "kosha", different psychologies are needed.

Most people belong to the "manomayakosha" which is the middle level of the five hierarchical stages of development. The "manomayakosha" refers to the mental level including the lower and higher minds. The lower mind or "manas" serves to coordinate sensory input and motor output after the higher mind, the "buddhi" has adjudged the meaning of the incoming sensory information and has decided on the course of action to be taken.

The "manomayakosha" is a wide band. Those who are primarily at the level of "manas" would exhibit impulsivity and a strong tendency to seek pleasure. Those who are primarily at the level of "buddhi" would be more discriminating. Therefore this "kosha" represents a stage of intellectually controlled emotionality; a stage where cognitive structures exert controlling influence on emotions. Modern psychological theories which have relevance within the framework of "manomayakosha" are cognitive theories of stress (Lazarus, 1975; Rosenbaum, 1988).

One of the aims of this study was to demonstrate the possibility of conceptual bridges between disparate paradigms. Therefore, the findings of this study will be interpreted in terms of the cognitive theories of stress.

### **Anāsakti, Perception of Distress and Strain**

The most significant finding which emerged from this study concerned the perception of distress in stressful life events. It was found that subjects high on anāsakti did not significantly differ from those low on anāsakti in terms of the number of life events

which had occurred in their lives (SSS). When the number of events which they had experienced was controlled, the average subjective perception of distress (ADR) was significantly lower for subjects who were high on anāsakti. The tendency to experience less distress in general, helped the more anāsakti subjects to maintain superior physical and psychological health compared to those who were low on anāsakti.

Stress is a multi-dimensional concept which necessitates an understanding of its personal and environmental antecedents. Lazarus (1975) has emphasised the significance of threat appraisals in the perception of distress in negative life events. Another important facet of appraisal refers to the meaning which is assigned to those events. Negative life events can be more deleterious if they are perceived to be central to one's existence, are considered to be stable and are attributed to global causes (Metalsky, Halberstadt, & Abramson, 1987).

These psychological interpretive mechanisms are crucial in determining the emotional reactions to stressful life events. Depending upon whether the situation is interpreted as harmful, beneficial, threatening or challenging, an individual experiences positive or negative emotions. The interpretation of a situation as involving harm or threat generates such affective states as anxiety, nervousness, tension and anger. The affective states, which may be the most ubiquitous emotional reactions to situations which are appraised as stressful, interfere with cognitive functioning and with coping (Schwarzer, 1984). Two mechanisms of interference have been emphasised. First, a motivational one in which attention is diverted from the task at hand to more pressing emotional crisis which is perceived to be associated with a situation (Schönplflug, 1983), and second, a cognitive one in which anxiety related thoughts, which may be unrelated to performance, are nurtured. If, however, a situation is interpreted as presenting challenges rather than threats, more positive emotions are experienced leading to effective coping. Folkman and Lazarus (1988) have suggested that on certain occasions, focusing on the problem which is causing distress may lead to an improved emotional state. They refer to focusing on the problem as planful problem solving. According to them, planful problem solving results in an improved person-environment relation leading to a favourable cognitive appraisal and, therefore, to a more positive emotional response.

Within this framework, the findings relating to the perception of distress can be interpreted. As stated earlier, subjects high and low on anāsakti differed from each other with respect to their subjective perception of distress (ADR) and symptoms of strain. Since anāsakti is characterised by a strong tendency toward effort orientation, those high on anāsakti were able to evoke action-oriented self-regulatory processes more effectively than those who were low on anāsakti.

Self-regulatory processes consist of three phases (Rosenbaum, 1988). When stressful situations are encountered, these phases involve representation, evaluation and action. In the representation phase, the individual reacts emotionally and/or cognitively to stressors which cause disruption in his daily routine. In the evaluation phase, he evaluates the significance of disruption caused by stressors in terms of his well-being. In the action phase, he responds to stressors in such a way that the disruption may be minimised.

Significant mean differences in ADR suggested that individuals high and low on anāsakti differed from each other in the manner in which stressors were represented. When they confronted stressful life events, they felt differentially distressed. Anāsakti helped the higher anāsakti group to evaluate stressful events as presenting challenges rather than threats. They could evolve suitable coping strategies because of their disposition to remain emotionally poised. In the case of subjects low on anāsakti, threat appraisals, emotional instabilities and coping ineptitudes may have led to greater perceived distress. These individuals also manifested more symptoms of psychological and physical ill health.

### **Anāsakti: The Predictor of Strain**

The relative significance of anāsakti and stress scores in predicting strain was tested. More than the stress scores, anāsakti significantly predicted strain symptoms. This finding suggested that dispositional factors increased an individual's susceptibility to stressors more than the situation itself. Anāsakti was found to represent one facet of human personality which helped individuals remain well adjusted and healthy despite exposure to stressors. It was also found that the contribution of anāsakti in predicting strain was greater than the contribution of stress scores. The psychological processes underlying this finding will be discussed.

As stated earlier, *anāsakti* refers to an end state and also a means to achieve that end state. The end state is that of self-realisation which can be gradually approached through the performance of actions without attachment to their consequences. One who has achieved this end state, "the *siddha*", becomes spontaneously *anāsakt* by terminating his identity with the "empirical self" (Tart, 1975). He enjoys a state of profound peace which cannot be altered by any crisis. One who aspires to achieve that state, "the *sādhaka*", remains in peace because he voluntarily relinquishes all egoistical desires and practises *anāsakti* as a means to achieve his goal.

Even the western literature on stress admits that perception regarding thwarting of desires constitutes major category of stressors and presents potential dangers to an individual's well-being. Houston (1987) has defined desires as longing for something which one does not have and keeping something which one already has. Desires emanate from attachment. Individuals experience distress when their attachment to people or things is threatened. Stronger the attachment, greater is the desire to protect and preserve and higher will be the feeling of agitation if that desire is thwarted.

Coping with negative life events is influenced by an individual's "assumptive world" (Parkes, 1975). This world consists of his strongly held assumptions about the world and about his own self. Epstein (1984) has asserted that an individual's personal theory about reality acts as a conceptual tool for solving life's fundamental problems. According to him, this theory incorporates a world theory and a theory regarding self. It may not exist in his conscious awareness but as a preconscious conceptual system, it may structure his experiences and direct his behaviour. Implicit in the ideal of *anāsakti* is a world view in which self-realisation is considered to be the goal of human life and identification of self with the material world to be a major impediment in the path of self-realisation. This world view perhaps helped people in changing the perception of life events from stressful to benign, reducing egotism from strivings and hence softening the impact of many stressors.

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