

Prajnaparadha as an Epistemological Error: Reconstructing the Ayurvedic Theory of Human Cognitive Failure – A Critical Review

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Abstract—Prajnaparadha (intellectual blasphemy or error of judgment) is one of the most fundamental concepts in Ayurveda and is regarded as a primary cause of disease, suffering, and behavioral dysfunction. Classical Ayurvedic texts describe Prajnaparadha as the improper utilization of Dhi (intellect), Dhriti (self-control), and Smriti (memory), resulting in actions that are knowingly harmful to physical, mental, and social well-being. While traditionally discussed within the context of disease causation, the concept possesses broader philosophical significance as a theory of human cognitive failure. The present review critically examines Prajnaparadha from an epistemological perspective and explores its relevance in understanding decision-making errors, maladaptive behavior, and cognitive distortions. Classical references from major Ayurvedic texts are analyzed to reconstruct the conceptual foundations of Prajnaparadha and its relationship with knowledge acquisition, moral reasoning, self-regulation, and health behavior. The review further examines parallels between Ayurvedic descriptions of impaired cognition and contemporary theories in cognitive psychology, behavioral sciences, neuroscience, and judgment and decision-making research. Particular emphasis is placed on the disruption of Dhi, Dhriti, and Smriti as mechanisms underlying irrational choices and health-compromising behaviors. The analysis suggests that Prajnaparadha represents a sophisticated Ayurvedic model of cognitive and behavioral dysfunction that extends beyond disease etiology and offers valuable insights into human error and self-destructive decision-making. Reinterpreting Prajnaparadha through contemporary epistemological and cognitive frameworks may contribute to integrative approaches for understanding health behavior, preventive medicine, and mental well-being. Thus, the concept remains highly

relevant in the context of modern healthcare and interdisciplinary cognitive research.

Index Terms—Prajnaparadha, Dhi, Dhriti, Smriti, Cognitive Failure, Epistemology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda considers health and disease as outcomes of the dynamic interaction between the body, mind, senses, and environment. Among the various factors responsible for disease causation, Prajnaparadha occupies a unique position and is regarded as one of the three principal causes of disease, along with Asatmyaindriyarthasamyoga and Parinama. Classical Ayurvedic texts describe Prajnaparadha as the improper utilization of intellect, memory, and self-restraint, leading individuals to engage in actions that are harmful despite possessing knowledge of their adverse consequences. Thus, Prajnaparadha is not merely a behavioral error but a deeper disturbance in cognitive functioning and decision-making. [1]

The term Prajnaparadha is composed of two words: Prajna, meaning wisdom, intellect, or higher knowledge, and Aparadha, meaning transgression or error. Together, the term denotes an error of judgment arising from the failure of correct cognition. According to Ayurveda, when Dhi (intellect), Dhriti (self-control), and Smriti (memory) become impaired, individuals fail to discriminate between beneficial and harmful actions. As a result, they knowingly engage in unhealthy behaviors that disturb physiological and psychological equilibrium and ultimately contribute to disease manifestation. [2]

The concept of Prajnaparadha extends beyond the domain of medicine and possesses profound philosophical significance. It represents an Ayurvedic explanation of why human beings frequently act against their own well-being despite possessing adequate knowledge. This phenomenon is observable in contemporary society through unhealthy lifestyles, substance abuse, stress-inducing behaviors, poor dietary practices, and non-adherence to medical advice. Such actions often arise not from ignorance but from failures in judgment, self-regulation, and behavioral control. [3]

Modern cognitive sciences similarly recognize that human decision-making is vulnerable to various forms of cognitive failure. Research in psychology, neuroscience, and behavioral sciences has demonstrated that impaired executive function, cognitive biases, defective self-control, and memory-related distortions significantly influence behavior. These findings suggest interesting parallels with the Ayurvedic description of impaired Dhi, Dhriti, and Smriti. Although developed within different intellectual traditions, both perspectives acknowledge that disturbances in cognitive processes can lead to maladaptive choices and adverse health outcomes. [4] Recent interest in integrative medicine and interdisciplinary health research has encouraged scholars to re-examine classical Ayurvedic concepts through contemporary scientific perspectives. In this context, Prajnaparadha may be interpreted not merely as a moral or ethical failing but as a sophisticated theory of human cognitive error. Such an interpretation provides opportunities to explore its relevance in behavioral medicine, preventive healthcare, cognitive psychology, and public health. [5]

Despite its central importance in Ayurvedic pathology, Prajnaparadha has largely been discussed as a cause of disease, while its epistemological and cognitive dimensions have received comparatively limited scholarly attention. A critical examination of this concept may provide valuable insights into the Ayurvedic understanding of knowledge, judgment, decision-making, and behavioral regulation. Therefore, the present review aims to reconstruct Prajnaparadha as an Ayurvedic theory of human cognitive failure and to explore its relevance in the context of modern cognitive sciences and contemporary healthcare. [6]

II. HISTORICAL AND LITERARY EVOLUTION OF PRAJNAPARADHA

Prajnaparadha is one of the most important concepts in Ayurvedic philosophy and pathology. Ayurveda identifies Asatmyaindriyarthas, Samyoga, Prajnaparadha, and Parinama as the three primary causes of disease. Among these, Prajnaparadha is regarded as the root cause because it leads individuals to knowingly engage in actions that disturb physical and mental equilibrium. The concept reflects the Ayurvedic understanding that improper utilization of intellect, memory, and self-control can initiate the process of disease manifestation. [7]

2.1 Prajnaparadha in Charaka Samhita

Charaka Samhita provides the most elaborate description of Prajnaparadha. Acharya Charaka explains that impairment of Dhi (intellect), Dhriti (self-restraint), and Smriti (memory) results in improper actions, ultimately leading to disease. The text considers Prajnaparadha a fundamental disturbance in human cognition and behavior that causes individuals to deviate from healthy conduct despite possessing appropriate knowledge. [8]

2.2 Prajnaparadha in Sushruta Samhita

Sushruta Samhita also recognizes the role of improper judgment and behavior in disease causation. The text emphasizes that actions performed against the principles of health and ethical conduct contribute to physical and mental disturbances. Thus, Prajnaparadha is viewed as an important factor influencing both individual health and social well-being. [9]

2.3 Prajnaparadha in Ashtanga Hridaya

Acharya Vagbhata reiterates the significance of Prajnaparadha in maintaining health and preventing disease. Ashtanga Hridaya highlights that preservation of proper intellect, memory, and self-control is essential for healthy living. Failure of these faculties leads to inappropriate decisions and unhealthy lifestyle practices. [10]

Table 1. Classical Understanding of Prajnaparadha

Classical Text	Description of Prajnaparadha
Charaka Samhita	Fundamental cause of disease due to impairment of Dhi, Dhriti, and Smriti
Sushruta Samhita	Wrong actions and improper conduct leading to disease
Ashtanga Hridaya	Importance of maintaining proper judgment and self-control

The descriptions found in Ayurvedic classics indicate that Prajnaparadha was not viewed merely as an ethical lapse but as a disturbance in cognition and behavior. This understanding provides the basis for interpreting Prajnaparadha as an Ayurvedic theory of human cognitive failure, which remains relevant in the context of modern behavioral and cognitive sciences. [11]

III. CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF PRAJNAPARADHA

The term Prajnaparadha literally means "an offense against wisdom" or "error of intellect." It refers to the inability to utilize knowledge appropriately despite being aware of what is beneficial and harmful. According to Ayurveda, such failure arises due to disturbances in three fundamental cognitive faculties: Dhi, Dhriti, and Smriti. [12]

Table 2. Components of Prajnaparadha

Component	Meaning	Function
Dhi	Intellect	Correct understanding and discrimination
Dhriti	Self-restraint	Regulation of behavior and impulses
Smriti	Memory	Recall and application of knowledge

3.1 Dhi: Dhi refers to the faculty of intellect responsible for understanding, analysis, and discrimination between beneficial and harmful actions. Impairment of Dhi results in faulty judgment and incorrect decision-making. [13]

3.2 Dhriti: Dhriti denotes self-control and the ability to restrain oneself from inappropriate actions. Even when a person possesses correct knowledge, lack of Dhriti may lead to unhealthy behavior due to inability to control desires and impulses. [14]

3.3 Smriti: Smriti refers to memory and the ability to recall previously acquired knowledge. Disturbance of Smriti prevents an individual from applying beneficial knowledge in practical situations, resulting in repeated mistakes and unhealthy choices. [15]

The harmonious functioning of Dhi, Dhriti, and Smriti is essential for rational thinking and healthy behavior. Disturbance in any of these faculties may result in Prajnaparadha, ultimately leading to physical, mental, and social suffering. Therefore, Ayurveda considers Prajnaparadha a fundamental mechanism underlying disease causation and behavioral dysfunction. [16]

IV. PRAJNAPARADHA AS AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL ERROR

Epistemology is concerned with the nature, acquisition, and application of knowledge. In Ayurveda, health-promoting behavior is based upon proper cognition, rational judgment, and appropriate action. From this perspective, Prajnaparadha can be understood as an epistemological error in which an individual fails to apply correct knowledge despite possessing the capacity to distinguish between beneficial and harmful actions. Such failure results in behavioral deviations that ultimately contribute to disease and suffering. [17]

Ayurveda recognizes that knowledge alone is insufficient for appropriate conduct. The proper functioning of Dhi (intellect), Dhriti (self-restraint), and Smriti (memory) is necessary for translating knowledge into action. When these faculties become impaired, individuals may knowingly engage in unhealthy behaviors such as improper diet, excessive indulgence, suppression of natural urges, or harmful lifestyle practices. Thus, Prajnaparadha represents a breakdown in the process linking knowledge to behavior. [18]

Table 3. Prajnaparadha as a Process of Cognitive Failure

Cognitive Faculty	Normal Function	Consequence of Impairment
Dhi	Correct understanding	Faulty judgment
Dhriti	Self-control	Impulsive behavior
Smriti	Recall of knowledge	Repetition of mistakes

The impairment of Dhi results in defective perception and incorrect evaluation of situations. Disturbance of Dhriti weakens the ability to resist harmful actions despite awareness of their consequences. Similarly, impairment of Smriti prevents individuals from recalling previous experiences and learned knowledge, leading to repeated behavioral errors. Collectively, these disturbances create a state in which rational decision-making becomes compromised. [19]

From a philosophical perspective, Prajnaparadha differs from simple ignorance. Ignorance implies the absence of knowledge, whereas Prajnaparadha involves failure to act according to knowledge already possessed. Therefore, Ayurveda considers it a more serious cause of disease because the individual consciously deviates from appropriate conduct. This distinction highlights the sophisticated understanding of human behavior found in classical Ayurvedic literature. [20]

The concept also possesses significant ethical dimensions. Many unhealthy actions originate not from lack of information but from inability to exercise judgment and restraint. Consequently, Prajnaparadha may be viewed as an Ayurvedic explanation of self-destructive behavior, irrational choices, and failure of self-regulation. Such an interpretation provides a valuable foundation for exploring parallels between Ayurveda and modern theories of cognition, decision-making, and behavioral psychology. [21]

V. CORRELATION OF PRAJNAPARADHA WITH MODERN COGNITIVE SCIENCES

Recent advances in cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and behavioral sciences have provided new insights into the mechanisms underlying human decision-making and behavioral regulation. Interestingly, several aspects of Prajnaparadha described in Ayurveda exhibit conceptual similarities with modern theories of cognitive failure. Both perspectives acknowledge that disturbances in cognition, memory, and self-control can result in maladaptive behavior and adverse health outcomes. [22]

Table 4. Correlation between Prajnaparadha and Modern Cognitive Sciences

Ayurvedic Concept	Modern Correlation
Dhi	Executive function, reasoning, judgment
Dhriti	Self-control, impulse regulation
Smriti	Memory and learning processes
Prajnaparadha	Cognitive error and faulty decision-making

5.1 Dhi and Executive Function

The Ayurvedic concept of Dhi refers to the ability to understand, analyze, and discriminate between right and wrong actions. In modern cognitive sciences, similar functions are attributed to executive processes such as reasoning, planning, and judgment. Impairment of these functions may result in poor decision-making and inaccurate evaluation of consequences, resembling the disturbance of Dhi described in Ayurveda. [23]

5.2 Dhriti and Self-Regulation

Dhriti represents the capacity for restraint and behavioral control. Contemporary psychology recognizes self-regulation as a critical determinant of health-related behavior. Failure of impulse control is associated with overeating, substance abuse, addiction, and other maladaptive behaviors. This bears close resemblance to the Ayurvedic description of impaired Dhriti, where an individual knowingly engages in harmful actions despite understanding their consequences. [24]

5.3 Smriti and Memory Processes

Smriti is responsible for the retention and recall of knowledge. Modern neuroscience identifies memory as an essential component of learning and behavioral adaptation. Deficits in memory can impair the ability to apply past experiences to current situations, leading to repeated mistakes and poor decisions. Such observations parallel the Ayurvedic understanding of disturbed Smriti as a contributing factor in Prajnaparadha. [25]

5.4 Cognitive Biases and Faulty Decision-Making

Behavioral sciences have demonstrated that human decisions are frequently influenced by cognitive biases and irrational thought patterns. Individuals often make choices that are inconsistent with their long-term

interests despite possessing adequate information. This phenomenon closely resembles Prajnaparadha, where knowledge exists but is not translated into appropriate action due to impairment of cognitive faculties. [26]

The similarities between Prajnaparadha and modern concepts of executive dysfunction, impaired self-control, memory failure, and cognitive bias suggest that Ayurveda developed a sophisticated understanding of human behavioral errors. Although the theoretical frameworks differ, both systems recognize that disturbances in cognitive processes can significantly influence health and disease. Consequently, Prajnaparadha may be viewed as an early Ayurvedic model of cognitive and behavioral dysfunction. [27]

VI. CLINICAL AND PUBLIC HEALTH RELEVANCE OF PRAJNAPARADHA

The concept of Prajnaparadha has significant clinical and public health implications because many contemporary health problems are closely associated with inappropriate lifestyle choices and behavioral factors. Ayurveda considers Prajnaparadha a fundamental cause of disease because it leads individuals to knowingly engage in actions that are harmful to health. Such behaviors disturb physiological balance and increase susceptibility to various disorders. [28]

In the context of lifestyle disorders, Prajnaparadha can be observed in unhealthy dietary habits, physical inactivity, irregular sleep patterns, and excessive stress. Despite awareness of their harmful consequences, individuals often continue these practices, contributing to the development of obesity, diabetes mellitus, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases. This reflects the failure of proper judgment and self-regulation described in Ayurvedic literature. [29] The concept is equally relevant in understanding substance abuse and addiction. Tobacco use, alcohol dependence, and other addictive behaviors frequently persist despite awareness of their adverse health effects. Such actions may be interpreted as manifestations of impaired Dhi, Dhriti, and Smriti, resulting in repeated engagement in harmful activities. [30]

Mental health disorders also demonstrate the practical relevance of Prajnaparadha. Chronic stress, anxiety,

anger, and emotional disturbances often arise from maladaptive thought patterns and poor behavioral regulation. Ayurveda recognizes that disturbances in cognition and self-control can adversely affect both mental and physical health. Therefore, correction of Prajnaparadha forms an important component of preventive and promotive healthcare. [31]

Table 5. Clinical Relevance of Prajnaparadha

Health Condition	Role of Prajnaparadha
Lifestyle disorders	Unhealthy diet and lifestyle choices
Obesity and diabetes	Failure to follow healthy habits
Addiction	Impaired self-control and judgment
Stress-related disorders	Maladaptive behavioral responses
Treatment non-compliance	Failure to apply health knowledge

From a public health perspective, the prevention of Prajnaparadha may contribute to healthier lifestyles and improved health outcomes. Health education, behavioral modification, stress management, and cultivation of self-awareness can help individuals make informed decisions and avoid actions detrimental to health. Thus, the concept remains highly relevant in contemporary preventive medicine and health promotion. [32]

VII. CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF PRAJNAPARADHA

The concept of Prajnaparadha is one of the most distinctive contributions of Ayurveda to the understanding of health, disease, and human behavior. Its major strength lies in recognizing that disease often originates from errors in cognition, judgment, and behavior rather than solely from external factors. By emphasizing the roles of Dhi, Dhriti, and Smriti, Ayurveda provides a comprehensive framework for understanding why individuals knowingly engage in actions that are detrimental to their well-being. [33]

A notable feature of Prajnaparadha is its multidisciplinary relevance. The concept extends beyond disease causation and encompasses cognitive processes, ethical decision-making, behavioral regulation, and preventive healthcare. Many contemporary health challenges, including lifestyle disorders, addiction, stress-related illnesses, and

treatment non-compliance, can be interpreted through the lens of Prajnaparadha. This broad applicability highlights its continuing relevance in modern healthcare. [34]

However, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The concept originates from a philosophical and holistic framework that differs significantly from contemporary scientific methodologies. While parallels can be drawn with cognitive psychology and neuroscience, direct equivalence between Ayurvedic concepts and modern scientific constructs should be avoided. Furthermore, empirical research specifically evaluating Prajnaparadha remains limited, necessitating further interdisciplinary investigation. [35]

Despite these limitations, Prajnaparadha offers a valuable conceptual model for understanding cognitive and behavioral dysfunction. Future research integrating Ayurvedic principles with cognitive sciences, behavioral medicine, and public health may help clarify its theoretical and practical significance. Thus, the concept remains a promising area for interdisciplinary exploration and evidence-based application. [36]

VIII. CONCLUSION

Prajnaparadha is a fundamental Ayurvedic concept that explains disease causation through impairment of Dhi (intellect), Dhriti (self-control), and Smriti (memory). Beyond its traditional role in pathology, the concept provides a sophisticated framework for understanding human cognitive failure, faulty decision-making, and maladaptive behavior.

The present review demonstrates that Prajnaparadha can be interpreted as an epistemological error in which knowledge fails to translate into appropriate action. Its conceptual foundations exhibit notable similarities with contemporary theories of executive dysfunction, cognitive bias, impaired self-regulation, and behavioral errors. Such parallels highlight the enduring relevance of Ayurvedic thought in understanding human behavior and health.

Although direct scientific validation remains limited, Prajnaparadha offers a holistic perspective that integrates cognition, ethics, behavior, and health. Reconstructing this classical doctrine through modern cognitive and behavioral frameworks may enrich contemporary discussions on preventive medicine,

mental health, and health behavior. Therefore, Prajnaparadha remains not only a cornerstone of Ayurvedic pathology but also a valuable conceptual model for interdisciplinary research on human cognition and well-being.

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