



From Ego to Atman: Śraddhā, Vairāgya, and Śaraṇāgati as Mechanisms of Self-Transformation at the Maha Kumbh Mela

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In humanistic psychology, the process of self-transformation is significantly theorized and situated within Western ideology. This paper explores a profound cross-cultural model for this process, through pilgrimage, at the Maha Kumbh Mela. A monumental socioreligious gathering and the world's largest spiritual congregation of 2025, the Mela serves as a unique landscape for the transformation of self. Through autoethnographic narrative and theoretical analysis, this article argues that the Maha Kumbh Mela functions as a meticulously designed environment that facilitates self-transformation through the cultivation and practice of three Hindu principles: *śraddhā* (faith), *vairāgya* (detachment), and *śaraṇāgati* (surrender). Textual analysis of Hindu scriptures, including the Bhagavad Gita and the Vedas, lends their wisdom to the present scholarship. The author's personal account of the 2025 Kumbh Mela illustrates how these principles are lived and tested. In addition, ways in which large-scale religious gatherings, such as the Kumbh Mela, function as transformative spaces fostering collective spiritual growth are also examined. This framework is then placed in dialogue with existing humanistic psychological concepts on transformation. Ideas for future scholarship are also considered. The present paper contributes to ongoing academic conversations on ego dissolution and spiritual growth, providing valuable insights for humanistic psychology on the cultural and communal dimensions of transformation.

Public Significance Statement

This article illustrates how the world's largest spiritual gathering acts as a blueprint for personal change through faith, detachment, and surrender. It bridges Eastern spiritual practice and Western psychology, showing how culturally rooted communal experiences can powerfully guide the universal human journey of transformation.

Keywords: Maha Kumbh Mela, self-transformation, pilgrimage, cross-cultural, Hindu philosophy

This article was published Online First March 5, 2026.

Louis Hoffman served as action editor.

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Rochelle Suri has no conflicts of interest to disclose. This research did not involve human participants, human data, or animals. Informed consent is not applicable. No funding was used to support the research for this article. This paper did not require ethical approval, as it did not involve human or animal subjects. No part of this article has been presented in any conference. The ideas presented in this article have not been disseminated elsewhere. Data appearing in this article have not been presented elsewhere.

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The travel agent's phone call delivered devastating news: "Madam, all your hotel bookings and taxi bookings are canceled. We are overbooked and can no longer accommodate your group at the Kumbh Mela. I'm afraid you will have to make other arrangements" (Personal communication, [6th February]). My heart shriveled in anticipation of sharing this news with my fellow travelers, who were all set to get on a flight the next morning. A group of 10 people was to travel to Prayagraj, a tiny city in the state of Uttar Pradesh, which incidentally was hosting one of the biggest religious festivals on the planet. Hailing from different cities in India, the group was determined to board an outbound flight to Varanasi and find accommodation and transportation at any cost. This devastating news, which cost the group thousands of dollars, set the tone for the pilgrimage. The eve of our departure was fueled with anger, stress, anxiety, desperation, and frustration as the group frantically looked for other accommodation. After exhausting all options, we unanimously decided to proceed without confirmed lodging, trusting in divine intervention. On landing in Varanasi airport, the group, ranging from an 11-year-old boy to a 78-year-old lady, all got on their mobiles in a desperate search for hotel rooms. This was the peak of the Kumbh Mela, and we were shocked when, out of nowhere, a five-star hotel had rooms they were offering at reasonable rates. This unexpected reprieve reinforced our belief in a higher power's guidance. However, the looming uncertainty of accommodations in Prayagraj remained unsettling. This is where our faith and surrender, as a group, continued to hold strong; not one bone in our bodies told us we would not be taken care of. With great difficulty and negotiations, we hired three cars to drive us to Prayagraj, eager to reach the Kumbh Mela and bathe in the *sangam* (confluence of the three holy Hindu rivers). Our journey itself became an embodiment of surrender. A typical drive from Varanasi to Prayagraj of 3 hr evolved into a 10-hr journey. When we reached Prayagraj, it was frightful and daunting to see the masses of people streaming at us and around us, in all directions. I was gripped by fear as I held on to my 11-year-old son, who was ill-prepared for such an experience. As we reached the Maha Kumbh mela, the police stopped our cars and informed the drivers that visitors were only allowed to travel on foot or by motorcycle. It felt like this horror story would never end. The next 2 hr were grueling, as the group struggled to find a suitable way to travel to our accommodation, which we only managed to find enroute to Prayagraj. Before we even grasped the intensity of the Mela, we were told to get on the back seats of motorcycles of the locals, with all our bags and belongings. With no helmets, rocky roads, a sea of human beings, and deafening sounds from the banks of the *Ganges*, the only available anchor was a complete surrender to the moment. Despite every obstacle, our collective faith remained unshaken, sustaining us through an arduous yet transformative pilgrimage. When we finally reached the *ashram* (a place for religious retreat), disappointment was visible on every single face. The original accommodation was meant to be a luxurious tent with an ensuite washroom booked one month in advance of our travel. This luxury was now replaced with the simplicity of a basic tent, shared showers and washrooms, and no heaters. Winters in Prayagraj are harsh, especially so when one has inadequate clothing.

This series of unforeseen trials—the canceled bookings, the frantic search, the arduous journey, and the stark accommodation—was not a failure of planning but the first lesson of the pilgrimage. It forced the group out of a mindset of control and into a practice of deep surrender and faith. This personal experience serves as a microcosm of the larger transformative process enacted by millions at the Maha Kumbh Mela. Under normal circumstances, I would have abandoned all plans to carry on with the Mela and would have endured the financial loss. However, this Kumbh Mela was not to be missed as its occurrence was indisputably significant, literally a once-in-a-lifetime event.

The present article argues that the Maha Kumbh Mela functions as a powerful, culturally grounded model for self-transformation, operationalized through the cultivation of *śraddhā*

(faith), *vairāgya* (detachment), and *śaraṇāgati* (surrender) in pilgrimage. The present article is a qualitative analysis inspired by autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011), an emerging qualitative method that leans on “personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). This methodology is particularly well-suited within the realm of humanistic psychology, given the methodological alignment with the discipline’s core tenets. The method’s focus on subjective, lived experience and its capacity for holistic, narrative inquiry embodies the humanistic commitment to understanding an individual’s unique reality as an integrated whole. The value of autoethnography in humanistic psychology, as highlighted by scholars such as Peceguina et al. (2025) and Raab (2013), lies in its ability to give voice to subjective inner worlds. By using this method, the present article aims to situate ancient Hindu frameworks in dialogue with Western humanistic and transpersonal psychology. It is proposed that foundational Western concepts, such as Maslow’s (1943) self-actualization and Jung’s (1935) individuation, find a potent, lived expression within the context of the sacred gathering of the Maha Kumbh Mela.

The Field of Transformation: The Maha Kumbh Mela

The Maha Kumbh Mela of 2025 marks the completion of 12 Kumbh Mela cycles, occurring once in approximately 144 years, making it the rarest and most sacred of the Kumbh Melas. As per Hindu priests and astrologers, the rare astronomical alignment of the planets and stars (Sun, Moon, Jupiter, and Saturn) spanning the celestial realm above the Triveni Sangam, where a dip in the holy river Ganges is believed to wash away sins and grant *moksha* (salvation), makes the Kumbh Mela of 2025 a spiritual and religious phenomena not to be missed.

Hindu mythology is a vast and sometimes dramatic landscape. Gods, goddesses, demigods, demons, saints, and other celestial beings all play a role in the tapestry of Hindu religion and beliefs. Each one tells a tale that brings alive various dimensions of the human psyche, as do the stories and myths that are associated with them. The story of the Kumbh Mela is one such tale that has had and continues to have implications for humankind on a mammoth level. In Misra’s (2025) words:

The Kumbha Mela is the crown jewel of the Hindu experience—of being in harmony with the entire universe. Such a collective pilgrimage of entering into the sacred waters of the universe reflects our highest human aspiration to be one with the infinite and eternal. (p. xiii)

The word *kumbh* is the Sanskrit word for a pitcher or a jar of water; it is also a reference to the zodiac sign Aquarius. *Mela* is the Sanskrit word for an association or assembly. Hence, the Kumbh Mela is meant to be a sacred spiritual gathering for the masses to facilitate the exchange of information and interaction with enlightened teachers and saints of various lineages, sharing their work, teachings, and practices to all who attend the mela. The Kumbh Mela is held usually at an interval of four years at four religious cities in India—Haridwar, Prayagraj, Ujjain, and Nashik. Although there are several narratives that speak to the origins of the Kumbh Mela, the one that Hindus are familiar with and align with the most is the story of the *Samudra-Manthan*, or the churning of the oceans.

As per legend, the Kumbh Mela originated during an age when deities and demons walked the earth. A curse put on the deities made them fearful of their mortality. Lord Brahma (the creator of the universe) intervened and advised them to churn the Ocean of Milk to obtain *amrit* (or nectar), promising them immortality. Being a colossal task, the deities

solicited the support of the demons, who also wanted their share of the nectar. It was agreed that the nectar which emerged from the ocean would be equally divided among them both. For a thousand years, they churned the ocean until Dhanvantari, the god of medical science, emerged with the kumbh containing the nectar. Having decided they no longer wanted to share the nectar, the deities gave the task of saving the kumbh to the gods of the four planets—Jupiter, Sun, Saturn, and Moon. Enraged by the betrayal, the demons attacked the four gods, who fled with the kumbh. For 12 days and nights, the four gods were chased by the demons. On one occasion, the demons came close enough and attempted to snatch the kumbh. It is in this process that a few drops of the nectar fell on four parts of the earth—Haridwar, Ujain, Nashik, and Prayagraj, making these religious and auspicious sites. It is also pertinent to note that, in accordance with the Hindu texts, the four locations of the Kumbh Mela also correspond to the four *purusharthas* (goals of humans): Haridwar to *dharma* (righteousness), Ujain to *artha* (prosperity), Nashik to *kama* (desires), and Prayagraj to *moksha* (liberation). As per Hindu mythology:

When the combination of Sun, Moon, and Jupiter occurs in that constellation in a year, the ground (where the Kalasha fell) is full of the Kumbha of nectar and the Kumbha Parva occurs, not otherwise. Twelve Kumbha Parvas occur in twelve days of the *devas* (deities) or twelve years of humans. For destroying the sins of humans, four take place on the earth in *Bharata* (India) . . . A human who goes to the Kumbha during the *yoga* (astrological conjunction) becomes worthy of immortality. (Misra, 2025, p. 6)

Ultimately, Lord Brihaspati (Jupiter), with the help of Lord Surya (Sun), his son, Lord Shani (Saturn), and the Moon, saved the kumbh from the demons. During the celebrations of this celestial event, it is believed that the rivers transform into primordial nectar at auspicious moments, when the astrological positions of the Sun, the Moon, and Jupiter are completely aligned, thus making them the most powerful.

To mark and celebrate this event of grave importance, the Kumbh Mela is organized every four years at these sanctified places. Ramanand (2019) commented on the nature of the Kumbh Mela as being a conglomeration of saints and sages in the thousands:

Practically every guru, heads of spiritual organizations, religious sects, members of Akhadas (assembly or grouping of a particular sect of Hindu ascetics), Ashrams, ascetics, saints, monks, holy men and women, meditating yogis and seekers from high mountains, caves and jungles, rarely seen—all come out for the Kumbh Mela in their thousands. (pp. 10–11)

The Kumbh Mela was established in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in December 2017 (Misra, 2025). It is reverently believed that the waters of the four respective holy rivers are imbued with the nectar that fell in them thousands of years ago, at those specific historical and astrological moments.

A Framework for Self-Transformation Through the Spiritual Triad of Śraddhā, Vairāgya, and Śaraṇāgati

Hindu philosophy and discourse are anchored in a tapestry of values and principles forming the basis from which individuals operate and conduct their religious and spiritual lives. Of relevance to the Maha Kumbh Mela specifically, are the Hindu concepts of śraddhā (faith), vairāgya (detachment), and śaraṇāgati (surrender), which I believe is the bedrock for the millions of people who visit and participate in the Mela. Anchored in these three aspects,

pilgrims on their spiritual journey are able to stay grounded and face the challenges and hindrances that accompany their visit. As magnificent and unreal as the Kumbh Mela is, it also brings with it several perils and hardships that pilgrims have to face in their pursuit of spiritual liberation or *moksha*.

The pursuit of self-transformation—the fundamental reshaping of one’s being toward a higher state of awareness and functioning—is a unifying quest across human cultures and psychological disciplines. Across historical epochs, it has been explored through diverse lenses—psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, existential thought, and comparative religion. Various traditions have articulated their significance in distinct yet interconnected ways. Within humanistic psychology, this process is conceptualized as a drive toward self-actualization, which Maslow (1943) described as the realization of one’s full potential. Rogers (1961) further articulated this ideal as the journey to become a “fully functioning person,” characterized by openness to experience and existential living. In analytical psychology, Jung (1935) framed a parallel process, individuation, as the journey toward psychological wholeness and integration of the self.

The collective nature of the Maha Kumbh Mela enhances individual transformation through shared religious ardor. Participation in the Mela can induce altered states of consciousness due to intense devotion, sleep deprivation, and sensory overload. These experiences often lead to heightened self-awareness and emotional catharsis, key components of self-transformation. In addition, the physical challenges of pilgrimage, such as having to endure intense crowds and harsh conditions, serve as tests of resilience, reinforcing personal growth.

For the purpose of this paper, *self-transformation* refers to a deliberate and often profound process of personal change, where beliefs, behaviors, emotions, or identity of an individual are altered to achieve higher self-awareness, spiritual growth, or improved well-being. Within Hinduism, self-transformation takes on a deeply metaphysical dimension; it is the journey from the limited, ego-bound self (*jīvātman*) toward the realization of one’s true nature as the universal Self (*paramātman*). This process involves transcending the illusion (*māyā*) of individual separateness and recognizing the eternal, undivided consciousness that pervades human existence.

The Maha Kumbh Mela is not merely observed; it is lived. The philosophical principles that underpin it are not abstract ideas but felt realities, tested in the crucible of pilgrimage. The following account traces my journey through the three pillars of this transformation—śraddhā, vairagya, and śaraṇāgati—not as scholarly concepts, but as forces that shaped every moment of the experience, from the first devastating phone call to the final surrender at the sangam.

Śraddhā: the Faith to Begin

Śraddhā refers to several meanings and nuances in the Vedas and other Hindu texts (Gonda, 1963; Griffith, 1896). For the purpose of this paper, “. . . śraddhā indicates an affirmative and sincere attitude, where the person concerned has faith in the concerned postulate (be it the efficacy of Vedic sacrifices or the transcendental teachings of the Upanishads, etc.)” (Mitra, 2022, p. 1524). For Turci (2015), “Śraddhā is represented in the Gita as a ground to spirituality The etymology of śraddhā suggests the general meaning of ‘to place one’s heart on’” (p. 4).

The Maha Kumbh Mela is a living act of faith, no doubt. This concept ceased to be theoretical the moment I received the travel agent’s phone call. The cancelation of all our arrangements was a brutal inversion of our modern expectation of control. The ensuing panic and frustration were palpable. Yet, beneath the surface of our frantic search for alternatives, a

different current began to flow. After exhausting every logical option, a quiet consensus emerged: we would proceed to Varanasi without confirmed lodging or transport to Prayagraj. This was not a decision born out of recklessness, but of a collective, unspoken śraddhā—faith that the path would reveal itself even when all visible evidence suggested otherwise. Śraddhā was not a passive feeling; it was the courageous act of booking the flight despite the uncertainty. It was the essential fuel for the entire journey, the spark that allowed the transformative process to begin. That initial act of faith, taken in the face of overwhelming uncertainty, was the foundation upon which the entire pilgrimage was built.

Vairāgya: the Practice of Letting Go and Entering the Flow

In connection to faith is the idea of vairāgya or detachment. Bhavanani and Ramanathan (2010) note that vairāgya is a compound word which consists of “*vi* meaning opposite or without and *raga* meaning attachment, passion, feeling, emotion, interest, etc.” (p. 48). It is the cultivation of indifference toward temporal objects and worldly possessions. In the *Yoga Sūtras*, Patañjali states that vairāgya is critical in the practice of stilling the mind, which is necessary in any spiritual endeavor or for the purpose of self-realization (Bryant, 2009). Furthermore, vairāgya does not imply that one renounces all possessions and relationships and lives as a recluse. On the contrary, and more challenging, vairāgya implies that one engages with worldly possessions while consciously cultivating nonattachment and maintaining psychological freedom from the influence or consequences of material ownership.

For me, its most profound test was not merely about physical comfort, but about relinquishing the meticulously constructed script of how my pilgrimage *should* unfold. The chasm between expectation and reality was vast. The image of the luxurious tent and its comforts was seared in my mind. The reality of a basic tent, shared facilities, and the biting cold felt like a personal failure of planning. My ego, which had taken pride in its organizational skills, was confronted with a reality that refused to conform to my plans. In that moment, vairāgya became an active practice of releasing not just attachment to comfort, but to my very notions of how situations *should* play out. It was a conscious decision to stop fighting the reality of the basic accommodation and to accept the situation as it was, without judgment. This internal shift was transformative. By letting go of the struggle, a new state emerged—one remarkably akin to what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) terms the “flow state.” Flow is characterized by a deep immersion in the present moment, a loss of self-consciousness, and a sense of effortless action. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) believed that, “They tend to occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something that is difficult or worthwhile” (pg. 3). My surrender to the new conditions ended the internal conflict, allowing me to end the preoccupation over lost luxury and instead, become fully present to the raw energy of the Mela itself. The energy that was previously exhausted on resistance was now freed, enabling a more authentic and engaged participation. This was the freedom of vairāgya: not a cold indifference, but a graceful alignment with reality that allowed me to enter the flow of the pilgrimage itself.

Śaraṇāgati: the Courage to Be Carried

The third and final aspect of the triad is surrender - to the outcome of an event or situation despite all of one’s efforts and intentions toward a desired result. Śaraṇāgati or surrender involves a deep and unshaken belief in the divine, trusting God’s will and letting go of ego or the “I” (*ahaṅkāra*). A fundamental tenet of the process of surrendering requires that the devotee cease to rely solely on personal effort and instead depend entirely on God’s will. Lord Krishna, in the Bhagavad Gita, emphasizes the importance of surrender in one’s approach to

life and situations on numerous counts (Prabhupada, 2006). In one such sermon to Arjuna, Krishna says, “Abandon all varieties of dharmas and simply surrender unto Me alone. I shall liberate you from all sinful reactions; do not fear” (Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 18, Verse 66). Through this statement, Krishna emphasizes the importance of acting without attachment to the results of one’s actions. On a more evolved level, śaraṇāgati involves an unwavering acceptance of the divine will, trusting and acknowledging that acting in accordance with God’s will is a vital element of a spiritual life. Research suggests that this form of surrender differs fundamentally from passive resignation, instead representing an active, faith-based coping strategy particularly evident in situations of extreme adversity (Pargament, 1997).

The ultimate test of śaraṇāgati arrived when our cars were stopped miles from the sangam. The directive that we must continue on foot or on local motorcycles felt like the final, insurmountable barrier. Being handed over to a stranger on a motorcycle, weaving through the chaotic sea of people, I was gripped by primal fear. In that moment, I had a choice: to feed my fear and focus on all the possible negative outcomes or to remind myself that my experience was purely the will of God. The only path forward was to consciously, willfully, and completely surrender—to the driver’s skill, to the flow of the crowd, and to the divine grace that had guided me this far. This was śaraṇāgati. It was a conscious letting go of the reins, a decision to stop being the author of my story and to become a participant in a larger story. The fear did not vanish, but it was enveloped by a palpable sense of being carried. This surrender was not an end but a beginning—the key that unlocked a state of grace and allowed me to fully receive the transformative power of the Mela. It was the dissolution of the “I” that made room for a meaningful connection to something infinitely greater.

The Collective Crucible: Śraddhā, Vairāgya, and Śaraṇāgati Through a Wider Lens

My personal journey of transformation through faith, detachment, and surrender was a single thread in a vast tapestry being woven at the Maha Kumbh Mela. The potency of pilgrimage is in the way it elevates these individual practices into a collective force. Speaking to this potency, Divya and Murthy (2020) elaborate as follows:

Pilgrimage is a source of a meaningful and a personal engagement with spirituality. It is a healing journey with transformative powers. It exerts its influence not only on personal but at interpersonal level linking people to reconnect with others and community. (p. 36)

This transformative power is crystallized in the lived experiences of millions. Events such as the Maha Kumbh Mela exert an almost magnetic allure, drawing multitudes into a sacred space explicitly designed for transformation. Testimonials from attendees consistently highlight profound shifts catalyzed by their immersion in rituals, whether through purificatory bathing, devotional chanting, philosophical discourses, or heightened emotional states. Divya and Murthy (2020) observed that pilgrims “acknowledged the feeling of a positive spiritualistic transformation within them” (p. 40), underscoring the festival’s transformative potency. This aligns with Nandan’s (2002) symbolic interpretation of the Kumbh’s mythological roots:

The rationale behind the myths surrounding samudramanthan, or the churning of the ocean, is that it symbolizes introspection or meditation. The conflict between the good and the evil is analogous to the battle between the gods and the demons. Thus, the reasoning is that the churning of thought processes during meditation ultimately leads a person to enlightenment, or nectar. (p. 7)

Bathing at the confluence, despite harsh conditions, with the belief that the water holds the nectar of immortality, demands tremendous faith. This ritualistic act is based only on a belief and not a proven fact. Similarly, faith in the power and knowledge of learned teachers or gurus, for which pilgrims travel and endure considerable hardship, is also to be considered. The Mela crystallizes śraddhā as active, embodied faith right from the very moment a pilgrim decides to take on the arduous task of arriving at and attending the Mela to the time he or she bathes in the sangam.

Similarly, *vairāgya* is exemplified by the *kalpavasis*, predominantly householders, who choose to stay on the banks of the confluence for a long period (usually a month), leading a spartan and pious life with minimal comforts (Misra, 2025). Consciously leaving the comforts and predictability of their homes, and sometimes even their children behind, the kalpavasis are a profound testament of vairagya in practice. As Misra (2025) documented, the kalpavasis are committed to “their vows while residing in simple and small tents, eating once a day, bathing thrice a day, and finding bliss in meditating, chanting, reading, listening, and singing” (p. 90). Most of them also refrain from any physical intimacy, even while living as married couples or partners. A study by Maheshwari and Singh (2009) of the Ardh-Kumbh Mela (held in Prayag, Allahabad, India during the months of January and February, 2007) reported that the kalpvasis had significantly high levels of happiness and life satisfaction despite the austere and simple living conditions.

Finally, śaraṇāgati manifests collectively in ways that often contradict pilgrims’ expectations. For instance, many who anticipate comfort face austere conditions, and some must even surrender their desire to attend at all. Surrender may extend beyond physical hardship to include accepting divine will in more profound ways. Many devotees must reconcile with their inability to attend the festival despite extensive preparation, while others who do arrive may find themselves physically or emotionally unable to reach the sangam for ritual bathing. These experiences align with Hindu philosophical concepts of *tśvara-pranidhāna* (surrender to the divine) as described in the *Yoga Sūtras* where relinquishing attachment to outcomes becomes central to spiritual progress (Bryant, 2009; Satchidananda, 1990).

The concept of *diksha* or sacred initiation into a religious order for renunciation is another avenue through which individuals at the Mela practice surrender, marking the initiate’s unconditional submission to the divine will. The diksha ceremony itself is a complete exercise in surrender. The initiate performs several rites which entail the shaving of the head (representing detachment from vanity), burning of the cloth (representing the renunciation of all material possessions), and chanting of god’s name (declaring sole allegiance to God). In addition, the guru gives the initiate a new name, severing past attachments and all social and familial bonds.

The Farther Reaches of Human Nature: A Dialogue Between Humanistic Psychology and Hindu Ideology

Having established how the Kumbh Mela facilitates self-transformation through the lived principles of śraddhā, vairāgya, and śaraṇāgati, on a personal and collective level, it is essential to place this ancient wisdom in dialogue with Western psychological models. Although my pilgrimage offers a phenomenological account of transformation, its full significance for a contemporary audience is illuminated by examining its points of convergence and divergence with the humanistic concepts of self-actualization and individuation. This comparative analysis reveals not only shared human aspirations but also distinct philosophical underpinnings regarding the ultimate goal and process of human growth and transformation.

A fundamental dialogue is initiated by comparing the goals of these transformative journeys. In humanistic psychology, particularly in the work of Maslow, the process of psychological transformation is through self-actualization. Maslow (1943) described this as the full realization of one's potential, characterized by peak experiences, creativity, autonomy, and an acceptance of self and others. The self-actualized individual is a fully functioning, unique expression of humanity, albeit firmly rooted in the material world. The ego or the self, within this framework, is not dissolved but is rather strengthened, integrated, and aligned with one's true nature. In contrast, Hindu ideology, which underpins the Kumbh Mela, aims for moksha—liberation from the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*), and the dissolution of the individual ego (*ahaṅkāra*) into universal consciousness. The goal is not a more evolved individual self, but the transcendence of individuality itself. Where Maslow's vision is fundamentally life-affirming and focuses on optimal functioning within the material world, the Hindu goal of moksha is transcendence, seeking freedom from the world of *māyā* (Mishra, 2025). This represents a critical divergence: humanistic psychology seeks to cultivate the ego, while Hindu philosophy seeks to release it from the impermanence of the material world.

The transformative processes outlined by each school of thought also invites a comparative analysis. The Hindu journey from the ego-bound *jīvātman* to the universal *paramātman* finds a meaningful parallel in Jung's (1939) process of individuation. Jung conceptualized psychological growth as a lifelong process of integrating conscious and unconscious aspects of the psyche to realize the Self—an archetype of wholeness that transcends the limited ego. It is noteworthy that Jung's (1969) concepts related to the psyche, especially the "collective unconscious" was shaped by his engagement with Hindu philosophy, particularly during his travels in India—a direct cross-cultural influence that enriches this comparative dialogue. Both frameworks describe a fundamental movement from a state of fragmentation toward one of integration and expanded awareness. In this view, the Hindu aim of transcending the illusion of *māyā* is analogous to the Jungian endeavor of withdrawing projections and making the unconscious conscious, thereby liberating the individual from a narrow ego-identity. Both ideologies aim to dismantle a false perception of reality. Both paths require self-observation (*svadhyaya*) to lift the veil of illusion and recognize a deeper truth—the integrated Self for Jung, or the universal *paramātman* for Hinduism.

The transformative process cultivated through the integrated practice of *śraddhā*, *vairāgya*, and *śaraṅgati* shares a phenomenological similarity with, yet is fundamentally distinct from, Maslow's (1964) concept of "peak experiences." Maslow described these as transient moments of euphoria and fulfillment, characterized by a feeling of limitlessness, loss of fear, anxiety, and self-consciousness, and a sense of unity with the world. Similarly, the psychological state achieved through the spiritual triad mirrors this phenomenology of transcendence (as previously demonstrated by the author's personal experience). However, a critical divergence lies in the nature and ultimate aim of the experience. Within Maslow's framework, a peak experience is typically a spontaneous and temporary experience of a higher state of consciousness. In contrast, Hindu ideology presents a deliberate, systematic discipline where such a transcendent state is not an accidental peak but the intended culmination of a spiritual journey aimed at the attainment of moksha. This ideology has been consistent in several ancient Hindu scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita, the Vedas, and the Upanishads (Chinmayananda, 1983). Thus, although a peak experience is a fleeting event with transformative potential, the mechanisms of *śraddhā*, *vairāgya*, and *śaraṅgati* constitute a sustained pathway designed to make such transcendence an enduring reality.

A final, critical point of dialogue concerns the fundamental context of transformation. Humanistic psychology, with its roots in Western intellectual traditions that emphasize the individual, often conceptualizes growth as an introspective, individual journey. The

archetypal image is of an individual in therapy or engaged in self-reflection. The Maha Kumbh Mela presents a stark contrast to this paradigm. Here, transformation is not merely an individual pursuit but a culturally facilitated and inherently collective phenomenon. The power of the *sangha* (community), the authoritative guidance of the guru, and the participatory immersion in mass rituals are not merely ancillary; they are the very architecture of change for the vast majority of pilgrims. This collective dimension does not negate the individual's inner work but provides a powerful container that amplifies and directs it. Consequently, the Kumbh Mela model challenges humanistic psychology to expand its conceptual boundaries and more deeply investigate how deliberately designed communal containers—comprising shared ritual, sacred geography, and collective intention—can actively facilitate processes of self-actualization and transcendence that are typically sought in isolation.

This cross-cultural dialogue reveals that, although the metaphysical outcomes may differ—the cultivation of a fully realized self versus the dissolution of the egoic self—the pathways share significant similarities as well. The current analysis of the Mela does not invalidate Western concepts but rather complements them by offering a vivid, communal, and ritual-based architecture for transformation. It challenges Western psychology to consider how individuation and self-actualization might be supported, not only in the therapist's office, but within deliberately designed cultural containers that honor the human need for transcendence and collective belonging.

The Maha Kumbh Mela stands as a profound testament to humanity's enduring quest for transcendence. In a world increasingly dominated by materialism, digital fragmentation, and fleeting gratification, this sacred gathering offers a powerful counterpoint—a space where the deliberate practices of *śraddhā* (faith), *vairāgya* (detachment), and *śaraṇāgati* (surrender) converge to facilitate self-transformation. This paper has argued that these principles form a transformative triad, a lived pathway that guides pilgrims through a process of purification and self-realization, echoing Hinduism's timeless goal: the liberation of the individual soul (*jīvātman*) from illusion (*māyā*) and its union with the universal divine self (*paramātmā*).

Empirical accounts and mythological interpretations alike affirm the Mela's ability to catalyze inner metamorphosis. As the churning of the cosmic ocean (*samudramanathan*) symbolizes the churning of consciousness, so too does the Maha Kumbh Mela embody the turbulent yet purposeful journey toward spiritual liberation. The festival transcends its historical and cultural roots, speaking to a universal human aspiration—to shed the superficial and awaken to a higher existence.

This article, although offering a detailed autoethnographic and theoretical analysis, also has certain limitations. The primary source of evidence is the author's personal, subjective experience. Although this provides deep phenomenological insight, the findings are not generalizable to all pilgrims. Furthermore, the author's interpretation is inherently shaped by personal faith and cultural background. Although this emic perspective is valuable, it may differ from the experiences of another observer or a pilgrim with different motivations. Finally, the current theoretical dialogue is focused on specific strands of humanistic and Jungian psychology, leaving room for future research to engage with other psychological concepts and frameworks.

Future scholarship may explore longitudinal studies examining the Maha Kumbh Mela's psychosocial impact, particularly its role in influencing identity reconstruction. Qualitative research could explore the nuanced differences in transformation between various participants, such as householders, ascetics, and first-time attendees. Furthermore, a critical area for inquiry lies in the potential integration of these principles into therapeutic contexts. A systematic understanding of how *śraddhā*, *vairāgya*, and *śaraṇāgati* might be adapted to facilitate

resilience, posttraumatic growth, and spiritual well-being could enrich current humanistic and transpersonal clinical practice.

In the final analysis, the Maha Kumbh Mela is a poetic demonstration of the interplay of cosmic order and human experience. There have been and will continue to be various narratives and experiences of this mighty phenomenon. Yet, one truth remains evident: In its sacred waters and fervent gatherings, the Kumbh Mela continues to offer a rare sanctuary where the self is not merely affirmed, but transformed.

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Received May 26, 2025

Revision received December 14, 2025

Accepted January 10, 2026 ■

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