

## The Concept Of Soul (Atman) In The Orthodox And The Heterodox Schools Of Indian Philosophy: A Review

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**Abstract:** This review looks at the concept of an Atman (soul) in both the orthodox (Astika) and heterodox (Nastika) schools of Indian philosophy examining their divergent interpretations and implications for ethics and ultimately liberation (moksha) in the individual. The orthodox schools of Vedanta, Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika and Mimamsa affirm the existence of an Atman as an eternal unchanging entity that makes up the core of individual existence the view is that there are differing views on the link (Brahman) of the ultimate reality with regard to the path to liberation moksha). However contrary to the heterodox schools such as Buddhism and Jainism as well as Charvaka who have contrary views, Buddhism rejects the notion of an eternal soul in favor of the doctrine of Anatta (non-self) the view of Jainism acceptance the individuality of the soul bound by karmic forces long term being Charvaka deny the existence of an Atman and sectioned with consciousness that view as a material phenomenon. This paper provides a comparative review from a metaphysical basis of the foundations of the concepts of these views of their ethical consequences and offering an understanding of the concept of Atman in Indian philosophy.

**Keywords:** *Atman, Soul, Indian Philosophy, Orthodox Schools, Heterodox Schools, Vedanta, Samkhya, Yoga, Review.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

The nature of the soul or Atman is one of the most dominant ideas that provides the foundation for the Indian philosophical and spiritual tradition that provides a wealth of profound considerations on the essence of the self, consciousness and final reality (Asaftei, 2019). In a vast expanse of Indian philosophy, the notion of Atman is highly divergent based on the school one is devoted to. Orthodox Indian philosophical schools like Vedanta, Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya and Mimamsa tend to hold that the Atman is an eternal, conscious and independent self. These schools are bound together by their idea of the Atman being the ultimate reality which one realizes in their human existence, they then articulate various wishes of the cosmos and varying means to liberation. Each of the orthodox schools differing in its teachings and practices believes that liberation or self-realization (moksha) is attainable through acquisition of knowledge, systematic practice or spiritual awareness that leads to realization of the true nature of the self which is the Atma or Brahman the absolute unchanging reality (Kathuria, 2019).

By contrast, the heterodox schools of Indian philosophy provide alternative perspectives regarding the nature of Atman and the self. Buddhism, one of the most significant heterodox traditions, does so in a direct challenge to the orthodox understanding of an unchanging, eternal self. The Buddhist teaching of Anatta, or no-self, holds that the individual self is illusory, and it stresses impermanence and the interdependence of all things (Padmanabhan, 2012). On this view, attachment and suffering are caused by believing in an abiding self, and freedom is achieved through the perception of this lack. Though admitting the presence of an independent soul, or Atman, Jainism accords a powerful emphasis to the karmic forces that entrap it. Ascetic activities and ethical cleansing bring about freedom in accordance with Jains, and the soul is forever separate but joined to the cycle

of rebirth and reincarnation. The materialist, atheistic school of Charvaka holds consciousness to be a product of processes involving matter and rejects categorically the existence of a soul or Atman. They argue, as according to the Charvakas there exists no metaphysical or higher religious truth, that human existence is based merely on sensory knowledge and material things.

### 1.1. Objectives of the Study:

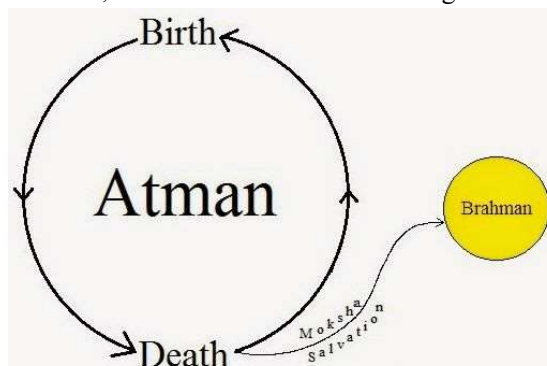
- To examine the idea of Atman in Indian philosophy from the perspectives of the heterodox (Nastika) and orthodox (Astika) schools.
- To contrast the various philosophical traditions' views on the ethical and metaphysical implications of Atman.

## 2. CONCEPT OF ATMAN (SELF) IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY:

The concept of Atman (self or soul) is the most cogent and enduring idea in Indian philosophy. It is one of the pillars both in spirituality and metaphysics and is utilized as a motif for comprehending existence, self, and ultimate reality. The idea of Atman is worked out in great detail in the orthodox (Astika) schools of Indian philosophy, such as Vedanta, Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, and Mimamsa. According to these schools, Atman is the immortal, immutable, and transcendental self of a person, typically equated with the soul. Conversely, some heterodox (Nastika) schools, such as Buddhism and Charvaka, deny or seriously question the reality of Atman. For such schools, the self is non-existent or a mere illusion (Bala, 2017). Despite the differences in the understanding of these schools, the conception of Atman plays a significant role in shaping their individual stand on knowledge, ethics, and liberation (moksha).

### 🌈 The Meaning and Nature of Atman:

The term Atman is obtained from the Sanskrit root "an," to breathe, and it denotes an essential life-sustaining energy. This life substratum is typically synonymous with the "self" or "soul". It is supposed to be immortal, unchangeable, and distinct from the physical body. The character of Atman transcends the material world, and it means outside the limits of time, space, and the senses. It is not limited to the person but also to the wider universe, with different schools of thought offering conflicting explanations of how it fits into the universe.



**Figure 1:** Meaning and Nature of Atman (Self) (Crawford, 2011)

Brahman, the final, impersonal, and all-encompassing Reality, is closely connected with Atman in Vedanta. Both are functionally identical, and liberation follows from the awareness of this unity. Atman is linked with Purusha (pure consciousness), which is separate from Prakriti (the material universe), as per Samkhya and Yoga schools. Samkhya and Yoga lay stress upon the distinction of consciousness from materiality, as opposed to the non-dualism of Vedanta. Conversely, Jainism recognizes the Atman as an individual being shaped by karmic forces through cycles of birth and rebirth. Jain philosophy promotes liberation through the attainment of moral purity and asceticism for purging the soul of accreted karma. By contrast, Buddhism solidly denies the belief in Atman and offers the doctrine of Anatta in place of it, which preaches that the self is an evanescent, composite thing instead of a permanent soul.

### 🌈 Atman in the Vedic and Upanishadic Tradition:

The first mention of Atman occurs in the Vedic literature, specifically in the Rigveda (around 1500 BCE), where it is a life force permeating living thing. Although the early writings discuss the concept of an

eternal self, they are not a developed philosophical treatment of it. The notion of Atman undergoes great change in the later Upanishads (approx. 800–300 BCE), when it is systematically presented, particularly with reference to Brahman—the final, pervading reality.



**Figure 2:** Atman in the Vedic and Upanishadic (Norelius, 2023)

The Upanishads are instrumental in the formation of the concept of Atman, in which the self is described as eternal, invincible, and beyond sensory knowledge. They support the perception that Atman is not just a fleeting element of the individual but is one with Brahman, implying that the ultimate reality is non-dual. This recognition of the unity of Atman and Brahman is key to attaining freedom (moksha), i.e., escape from the continued cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (samsara). This concept is succinctly expressed by the Chandogya Upanishad through the well-known words "Tat Tvam Asi" ("Thou art That"), positing the equality of the individual self with the ultimate reality. Likewise, the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad explores the characteristics of Atman in terms of its being unborn, eternal, and unbreakable (Mandal, 2022). These teachings of the Upanishads are the basis for subsequent Vedantic schools and are a part of the intense philosophical debate regarding the essence of the self and final liberation.

Through these formative texts, the idea of Atman emerges as a cornerstone of Indian philosophical understanding, not only shaping the religious and spiritual traditions but influencing the intellectual schools that developed. The various Atman perspectives from different schools expose the richness and intricacy of Indian philosophy as it seeks to define the self and its relationship to the world.

### **3. ORTHODOX SCHOOLS AND THE DOCTRINE OF ATMAN:**

The six traditional Indian schools of thought—Vedanta, Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, and Mimamsa—are united in asserting the existence of Atman but differ in specific interpretations of nature and purpose during the path towards spirituality. There is a divergence of metaphysical and applied schools of thought of the self which gives insight to the long debate of what it is to constitute the ultimate character of the soul (Banerjee, 2023).

#### **1. Vedanta: Atman and Brahman as One**

In Vedanta, and specifically in the Advaita Vedanta school of thought, the Atman is identified very closely with Brahman, which is absolute and ultimate reality. According to Advaita Vedanta, popularly articulated by Shankaracharya, Atman and Brahman are not two but one and the same. In accordance with the Upanishads, the self is eternal, unbreakable, and metaphysical, and it is only when ignorance (avidya) is removed that the real nature of the self is disclosed. In Advaita Vedanta, it is believed that this sense of differentiation between the individual soul (Atman) and the ultimate (Brahman) is born out of ignorance. This ignorance is the causal factor for all misery and bondage. The journey to freedom (moksha) in Advaita is the annihilation of this illusion by self-enquiry, resulting in the perception of the unity of Atman and Brahman. In this perspective, the final aim is to go beyond the illusory ego and perceive the interrelatedness of all existence, realizing the indivisible nature of reality.

#### **2. Samkhya: Purusha and Prakriti Dualism**

Samkhya philosophy, based on the sage Kapila, posits a dualistic picture of the cosmos through a division between Purusha (pure consciousness) and Prakriti (matter). Within this system, Atman is identified with Purusha, an eternal, passive, and immaterial thing. Purusha is the unadulterated awareness which sees the phenomena of life without being impacted by them. Conversely, Prakriti is the dynamic, material world of existence, which is ever-changing and is the cause of the experiences of the world. Purusha is liberated when it knows its true nature and separates itself from Prakriti, thus stopping itself from being involved in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. This isolation results in the experience of unadulterated, untainted consciousness, unclouded by material existence's distorting effects.

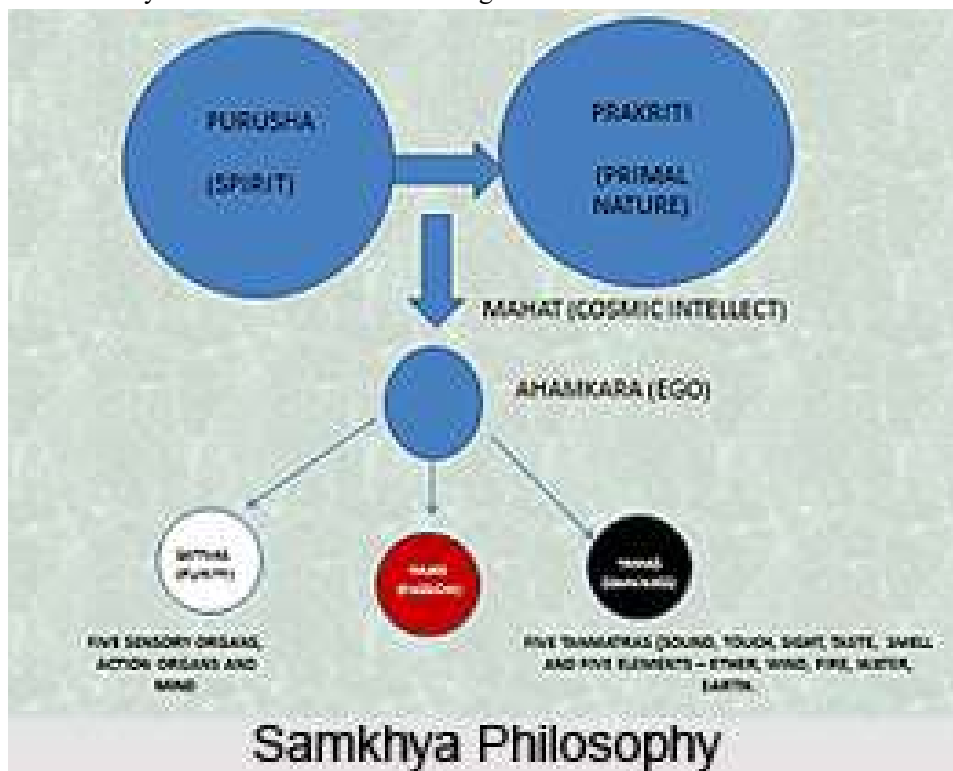


Figure 3: Samkhya Philosophy (Poller, 2019)

### 3. Yoga: The Practical Path to Realizing Atman

Most similar to Samkhya, the Yoga school of Patanjali provides a practical means of achieving Atman through rigorous physical and mental discipline. The core philosophy of Yoga is the Ashtanga Yoga, or eightfold path, which outlines steps to purify the body and mind. Through such practices as meditation, moral conduct, and physical postures (Astora, 2021), Yoga enables the practitioner to still the mind's fluctuations and achieve a state of deep concentration. In this state of meditation, Samadhi, one comes to know the self as distinct from material existence. The Atman of Yoga is similar to Purusha of Samkhya, the supreme, eternal consciousness. Liberation comes through the knowledge that the Atman is of a transcendental nature and is to be regarded as apart from the worldly realm of bodies and experiences.

### 4. Nyaya and Vaisheshika: Logical Proofs for Atman

Nyaya, the school of logic, and Vaisheshika, the school of atomism, each provides a logical foundation for Atman's existence by means of empirical observation and reason. Nyaya philosophy argues that Atman is an eternal substance with such properties as cognition, volition, and emotions. The school makes use of rational inferences such as continuity of memory, personhood, and continuity of self-consciousness as evidence of the soul's existence. Nyaya clarifies that since individual identity is unchanging despite changes in the body and mind, it reflects the existence of an unchanging and eternal Atman. Vaisheshika, on the other hand, categorizes Atman as one of the fundamental substances or dravyas, which affect the mind and body. The Vaisheshika school of philosophy holds that the existence of Atman is a basic aspect of the physical universe, serving as the basis for consciousness and perception.



## 5. Mimamsa: Atman and Ritualistic Liberation

Mimamsa, the school emphasizing Vedic ceremonial observances and virtuous activity, also postulates the reality of Atman (Mukhopadhyay, 2023). In contradistinction with Vedanta that endeavors to effect a dissolution of the individual distinction and realization of identity between Atman and Brahman, Mimamsa refrains from wanting to eliminate distinctiveness but enunciates purifying Atman through the engagement of righteous conduct (karma). For Mimamsa, the doing of ordained Vedic rituals and obligations creates spiritual merit, and it is through merit that one is liberated. The liberation of Mimamsa is not based on the experience of the identity of the self with the ultimate reality but on the earning of merit that cleanses the soul. In this regard, Mimamsa stresses the necessity of upholding moral behavior and discharging one's responsibilities as a means of achieving spiritual emancipation.

These traditional schools, with their distinctive understanding of Atman, present an array of metaphysical positions and practical methods of realizing the self and liberation. Collectively, they are a testament to the richness and diversity of Indian philosophy, presenting various pathways for the seeker to investigate the nature of reality and achieve spiritual realization.

## 4. HETERODOX SCHOOLS AND THE REJECTION OR MODIFICATION OF ATMAN:

In contrast to the orthodox Indian philosophical traditions, the heterodox schools of Buddhism, Jainism, and Charvaka provide competing perspectives that reject or redefine the traditional notion of Atman (Sharma, 2010). Whereas mainstream schools tend to affirm the reality of an eternally stable, unchanging self, the heterodox systems offer radical counter-examples each with alternative philosophy that either disallows or otherwise significantly reconfigures the existence of Atman in some fashion.

### 1. Buddhism: The Doctrine of Anatta (Non-Self)

Due to the Anatta (non-self) doctrine, Buddhism, which was established by Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), tends to negate the concept of Atman. Buddhist scriptures declare that the "self" is an impermanent compound of five aggregates, or skandhas: form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and awareness, and not an unchanging and eternal essence.



**Figure 4:** Buddhism: Heterodox School Philosophy (Subramanian, 2020)

**These factors are ever-changing and interdependent, with no permanent, intrinsic self that can exist apart from them. The existence of Atman, or a permanent self, is considered to be the cause of attachment and suffering (dukkha), since it creates the delusion of stability and permanence in a transient world. The understanding of non-self is, in this context, the doorway to liberation (nirvana). By understanding the vacuity of self and moving beyond attachment and lust, one frees oneself from birth, death, and rebirth (samsara), thereby achieving enlightenment and liberation from distress.**

## 2. Jainism: The Individual and Pure Atman

Jainism, as established by Mahavira, believes in the existence of Atman but outlines a concept that is vastly different from the Vedantic notion. According to Jain philosophy, every living creature has a separate soul known as jiva that is distinct and everlasting. But as opposed to Advaita Vedanta, which explains that the individual soul becomes one with the final reality (Brahman) when it is liberated, Jainism does not believe that liberated souls become one and lose their individuality. The soul is pure by nature but gets contaminated by karma by actions, thoughts, and desires.



Figure 5: Heterodox School Philosophy (Thompson, 2012)

**Liberation (moksha) in Jainism is attained by purifying the soul through ethical behavior, asceticism, and the acquisition of right knowledge. The aim is to destroy the karmic ties that bind the soul to the cycle of birth and death and attain a state of complete freedom, where the soul is unencumbered by all worldly attachments and misery. In contrast to Vedanta's non-dualism, Jainism preserves the separation between the ultimate reality and the individual soul.**

## 3. Charvaka: Materialism and rejection of Atman

The Charvaka school or Lokayata is a materialistic and atheistic school that is diametrically opposed to the conventional view of Atman in Indian philosophy. Charvaka philosophers maintain that consciousness and self-awareness are purely a function of the physical body and end with death. They dismiss any metaphysical conception of an afterlife.



Figure 6: Charvaka (Zickriya, 2022)

**In Charvaka philosophy, sensory perception alone is the sole source of knowledge; anything else that transcends the visible immediately is illusory or not trustworthy. The Charvaka school holds the view that in this system faith in Atman and spiritual emancipation is unnecessary and futile. Charvaka dictates that one must spend their human life experiencing sensual pleasures, material wealth, and worldly luxuries without the concern for permanent self or life hereafter. Therefore, Charvaka philosophy encourages the current-moment hedonism lifestyle, deeming spirituality as an extra prerequisite.**

Table 1: Reference Table

Reference	School	View on Atman	Liberation Concept	Study's Focus
(Iyer, 2010)	Vedanta	<i>Atman</i> = <i>Brahman</i> (ultimate reality)	Self-realization leads to union with <i>Brahman</i>	Provides an overview of the six main systems of Hindu philosophy, with particular focus on Vedanta's understanding of the self as <i>Brahman</i> .
(Nath, 2013)	Samkhya	<i>Atman</i> = <i>Purusha</i> (pure consciousness)	Liberation through knowledge of distinction between <i>Purusha</i> and <i>Prakriti</i>	Examines the nature of self in Indian philosophy, with a focus on Samkhya's concept of <i>Purusha</i> and the path to liberation through discernment.
(Levine, 2017)	Yoga	Similar to Samkhya; emphasizes practical methods	Liberation via meditation and self-discipline	Discusses the philosophical concept of self in Indian traditions, particularly Yoga, which blends theoretical knowledge with practical methods like meditation.
(Jha, 2017)	Nyaya-Vaisheshika	<i>Atman</i> is a logical necessity, eternal and conscious	Liberation through knowledge and logic	Focuses on the Nyaya and Vaisheshika schools, emphasizing their logical and metaphysical reasoning regarding <i>Atman</i> and the path to liberation through knowledge.
(Oetke, 2008)	Charvaka	No <i>Atman</i> ; consciousness is material	No concept of liberation, focus on material enjoyment	Discusses the Charvaka materialist perspective, which denies the existence of <i>Atman</i> and views consciousness as a physical phenomenon, thus rejecting the idea of liberation.

**This comparative analysis highlights the various views regarding Atman and liberation in orthodox and heterodox schools of Indian philosophy. Orthodox schools such as Vedanta, Samkhya, and Yoga accept the existence of Atman and provide ways for liberation, whereas the heterodox Charvaka school does not accept Atman at all but focuses on worldly pleasures and sensual experiences. Every school has something unique to say regarding the nature of the self and the ultimate end of human life.**

##### **5. CONCLUSION:**

Indian philosophy's soul or Atman is central to the majority of schools of thought and offers various interpretations that add to the philosophical debate on human life, consciousness, and liberation. The Vedantic school considers Atman to be the individual's eternal and unchanging nature and attempts to unite Atman with Brahman, the supreme cosmic reality. Atman in Samkhya philosophy refers to the individual consciousness that is independent of the material universe and which assists in self-realization and emancipation. Buddhism, for example, does not believe in a permanent soul (Atman) and instead teaches Anatta (non-self), which speaks

of the impermanence and interdependence of everything. Jainism, on the other hand, believes in the soul but teaches self-purification and non-violence to liberate. Even in these differences, Atman remains central to knowledge of human nature, the reason for being, and the highest aspiration of liberty, either in relation to the divine or enlightenment. The interpretations show the extent of Indian philosophy's diversity and provide timeless knowledge on self, consciousness, and liberty. The ideologies still influence individuals' spirituality and morality, providing ageless wisdom on self-discovery and cosmos consciousness.

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