

‘SA INDRIYAM CHETANA’: A CLASSICAL PERSPECTIVE ON LIVING AND NON-LIVING ENTITIES AS PER AYUREVDA

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Abstract

The concept of chetanā (consciousness) in Ayurveda provides a profound philosophical and functional basis for distinguishing living from non-living entities. Unlike modern biological definitions rooted in observable structures or metabolic processes, the Ayurvedic paradigm emphasizes the operational integration of ātma (self), indriyas (sense faculties), manas (mind), and śarīra (body) as essential for life (jīvatva). Drawing from foundational texts like Caraka Saṁhitā, Suśruta Saṁhitā, and Upaniṣads, this article explores how chetanā is not merely the metaphysical presence of ātma, but its active association with subtle faculties that enables perception, cognition, and action. Entities like plants are recognized as antaḥchetana dravyas due to their responsiveness, while artificial constructs such as machines and robots, though mimicking responses, are categorized as achetana due to the absence of subtle integration and inner awareness. Through classical references and logical analysis, the paper presents an Ayurvedic perspective on consciousness and critiques the

superficial equivalence between AI and sentient life. This re-examination of traditional views on chetanatva offers valuable insights into the enduring relevance of Ayurvedic thought in contemporary philosophical and technological discourses.

Keywords- Cetanadravya, Acetanadravya, Ātman, Jīvātman, Indriya

Introduction

In classical Indian thought, particularly in Ayurveda and allied philosophical systems, the concept of chetanā (consciousness) is regarded as a fundamental determinant of life (jīvatva). Unlike modern biology, which often defines life based on observable parameters such as cellular structure or metabolic activity, Indian systems of knowledge adopt a more subtle and integrated approach. A central expression from Caraka Saṁhitā sūtrasthāna- “sa indriyam chetanā” encapsulates this view, asserting that the presence of indriyas (sense faculties) along with manifest consciousness (chetanā) is essential for an entity to be considered living (sajīva).

Ayurveda classifies all dravya (substances) into two broad categories: chetana (conscious) and achetana (non-conscious). While the presence of Ātman (Self or soul) is often cited as the basis for consciousness, classical texts emphasize that chetanā becomes perceptible and functionally relevant only when Ātman is in conjunction with indriyas and manas (mind). In this integrated model, it is not merely the metaphysical presence of Ātman, but the operational capacity for perception and response enabled by these subtle faculties that defines chetanatva (sentience).

Discussion

Ātma: The Foundation of Chetanā

In classical Āyurveda, Ātma is recognized as the true agent (kartā) behind all actions, distinct from the sensory and motor instruments (karaṇāni). The Caraka Saṃhitā states:

"karaṇāny anyatā dṛṣṭā kartuḥ kartā sa eva tu |

kartā hi karaṇair yuktaḥ karaṇaṃ sarva-karmaṇām
||" (Caraka Saṃhitā, Śārīrasthāna 1.49)

This verse emphasizes that although the senses and mind are separate faculties, the doer is the self who wields them- the puruṣa, whose essential conscious principle is the Ātma.

The Kaṭhōpaniṣad employs the powerful metaphor of a chariot to explain the relationship between Ātma and the body-mind complex:

"ātmānaṃ rathinaṃ viddhi śarīraṃ ratham eva tu |
buddhiṃ tu sārathiṃ viddhi manaḥ pragrahaṃ eva
ca ||"(Kaṭhōpaniṣad 1.3.3)

Here, Ātma is the rider of the chariot (body), while intellect is the charioteer and mind the reins controlling the senses. This metaphor illustrates that Ātma is the foundational conscious presence that enables perception and action, though it itself remains inactive.

Thus, Ātma, as the inner self, is the indispensable basis of chetanā (consciousness) and life itself.

Indriyas as Instruments of Chetanā

Indriyas act as vital interfaces bridging the external world with internal consciousness. They are classified into two groups: Jñānendriyas, the organs of perception (such as the eyes and ears), and Karmendriyas, the organs of action (like the hands and speech). Individually, these faculties are inert (jaḍa), without their association with ātma. Consciousness becomes manifest only when Ātma, the indriyas, and the manas (mind) function in harmonious alignment, a synergy known as chetanā sambandha. In the absence of this union, the state is one of achetana or inertness.

This essential concept is beautifully captured in a śloka from Suśruta Saṃhitā (Shareera):

पुरुषस्य विषयज्ञानार्थं कर्मार्थं
वासधनीभूतशरीरभावविशेषः अवयवविशेषोवइन्द्रिया |

Susruta describes the body as the special form (bhāva-viśeṣaḥ) that serves as the dwelling place (vāsa-dhānī) of the puruṣa (self). It exists for the purposes of knowing objects (viśaya-jñāna) and performing actions (karma-artha). The body is composed of distinct parts (avayava-viśeṣaḥ) and endowed with special senses (indriyāḥ) that facilitate these essential functions.

Chetanā: A Functional Expression of Integration

According to Ayurveda, jīva (a living being) is not merely a physical body, but a dynamic integration of:

- Śarīra (body),
- Indriyas (sense faculties),
- Sattva/Manas (mind), and
- Ātma (Self).

This interdependent framework ensures that perception, cognition, and action arise only when all these components function in synergistic harmony. Chetanā (consciousness) is thus not produced by these instruments, but rather manifested through them.

A classical simile illustrates this:

Just as sunlight is omnipresent but becomes visible only when reflected by a mirror, Ātma's consciousness is expressed only when reflected through manas and indriyas.

This concept is clearly stated in Caraka Saṃhitā, Śārīrasthāna 1.54:

Ātmā jñāḥ karaṇair yogāj jñānaṁ tvasya pravartate |

Karaṇānām avaimalyād ayogād vā na vartate || 54 ||

The conscious self, though inherently knowing, functions only through the instruments [mind and senses]. In the absence or impairment of these instruments, knowledge does not manifest.

A parallel view is echoed in Vātsyāyana's Bhāṣya on Nyāya-sūtra:

Ātmā manasā samucyate, manaḥ indriyeṇa, indriyaṁ artheneti, tataḥ jñānotpattiḥ |

The self-associates with the mind, the mind with the senses, and the senses with the object- thus, knowledge arises.

Chetana Dravya: Definition and Scope

A Chetana Dravya is defined as any substance in which Ātma, Indriyas and Manas are functionally coordinated. This category includes:

- Humans
- Animals
- Plants

Although plants are stationary, they respond to environmental stimuli like light (phototropism), gravity (geotropism), and touch. Such responsiveness reflects the presence of subtle indriyas and an inner level of consciousness. Ayurveda recognizes this quality and classifies

plants as Antahcetana dravyas, substances endowed with internal consciousness.

Achetana Dravya: The Inert Substances

In contrast, stones, metals, and artificial machines are achetana dravyas. Though Paramātmā pervades all substances, the absence of jīvātma, indriyas, and manas renders these objects inert. Their inability to perceive, respond, or possess inner awareness differentiates them from living beings.

The Dead Body Paradox: Absence of Functional Integration

A compelling example is that of a dead body. Even though the indriya adhiṣṭhānas (physical sense organs) are present, the body remains inert. This is because, according to Sāṅkhya and Vedānta, at the time of death, the jīvātma departs, carrying with it the sūkṣma śarīra (subtle body) which includes the indriyas, manas etc.,. This severance leads to the absence of functional consciousness.

Hence, chetanā is not merely dependent on physical instruments but on the subtle integration of the indriya-manas-ātma complex.

AI and the Ayurvedic View of Achetanatva

According to Ayurveda, life (jīva) is not defined by physical form or mechanical response alone, but by the coordinated presence of śarīra (body), indriyas (sensory faculties), manas (mind), and jīvātma (individual self). While robots may have a physical structure and mimic perception and response, their instruments lack the sūkṣma functional energy

present in true indriyas. Their data processing does not equate to manas, which in Ayurveda includes desire, cognition, and emotional experience. Though Paramātmā is all-pervading (vibhu), it is only the embodiment of jīvātma, manas, and indriyas that results in chetanā (consciousness). As robots lack this subtle integration and inner awareness, they remain achetana dravyas—inert and devoid of true life.

Conclusion

The Ayurvedic framework offers a nuanced and holistic understanding of consciousness (chetanā), rooted in the functional integration of śarīra, indriyas, manas, and jīvātma. This model goes beyond mechanistic or structural definitions of life, emphasizing the role of subtle faculties and the living self in enabling perception and awareness. While modern technologies like AI and robotics may simulate external responses, they fundamentally lack the inner consciousness and coordinated subtle instruments required for true sentience. The absence of jīvātma and the incapacity for autonomous cognition and experiential awareness classify them as achetana dravyas in Ayurvedic terms. Revisiting classical parameters of life in this context not only affirms the depth of traditional Indian thought but also provides a philosophical lens through which to assess the evolving interface between consciousness and artificial intelligence.

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