

UNRAVELLING THE ENIGMA OF ATMA (SOUL): A JOURNEY INTO THE AYURVEDIC COMPREHENSION OF THE SELF

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Abstract

The Ayurvedic tradition views life not as a linear path ending in a void, but as a continuous journey of the soul through the cycles of time. This article explores the profound Ayurvedic and Vedantic triad of Death, Rebirth, and Salvation, seeking to understand how the *Atma* (soul) navigates the transition from one physical vessel to the next. In our classical texts, death is described not as an end, but as the shedding of a worn-out garment (*Vasan*), dictated by the subtle imprints of *Karma*. Examining the mechanics of rebirth, how the subtle body (Sukshma Sharira) carries the mind's desires across lifetimes, and the ultimate Ayurvedic goal of Moksha (Salvation). By aligning our lifestyle with Dharma, we can transcend the cyclical suffering of birth and death. Despite our vast accumulation of knowledge, the concept of *Atma* remains an enduring mystery, an enigma that eludes the grasp of senses and dwells beyond the horizon of human perception.

Keywords

Punarjanma (Rebirth), *Atma* (soul), *death*, *Karma*

Introduction

Ayurveda is far more than an ancient medical system. It is often described as a practical application of profound philosophical concepts taught in various Indian philosophical schools. Ayurveda is the science which imparts knowledge of *Ayu*(life). *Ayu* (life) is a complex structure formed by the congregation of Sharira(body), Indriya (sensory and motor elements), Sattva(mind) and Atma(soul).[1]

Atma (soul) is one among the nine causative substances in the *Tarka Sastra* [2], the *Nyaya* philosophy [3], the *Vaisheshika philosophy* [4] and Ayurveda.[5] According to Ayurveda, it is one among the four components of *Ayu* (life). According to *Tarka Sangraha*, the substratum of knowledge is *Atma* (soul).[6] This means knowledge is the property of *Atma* (soul). The term *Atma* (soul) is not used by *Samkhya* philosophy; instead, the system uses the term *Purusha* to denote it.[7] The *Atma* (soul) is characterised by several profound attributes that define its nature as the eternal essence of being.

It is known as *Avyaya* (unchanged) and *Sarvajna* (the superior factor responsible for all knowledge), existing as *Vibhu* (all-pervading and widespread) and *Avyakta* (unmanifested). As *Jnanavan*, it represents the seat of proficiency and knowledge, functioning as the *Kshetrajna* (the one who resides in and knows the body or *kshetra*). Its eternal nature is captured by the term *Nitya*, acting as the *Drashta* or *Sakshi* (the silent observer of everything) and the *Chaitanya rupa* (the very cause of life and consciousness). In the cycle of existence, it is identified as both *Karta* (the cause of creation) and *Bhokta* (the factor responsible for experiencing the fruits of actions and *karmaphala*).

Furthermore, the *Atma* (soul) is the *Jnata* (the knower of creation), manifesting as the *Jivatma* (soul) (the consciousness of the individual body) and the *ParamAtma* (soul) (the supreme soul of all souls). It is synonymous with *Parabrahma* (the almighty), having neither a beginning (*Anadi*) nor an end (*Ananta*). As the *Sarvashaktiman*, it is the supreme source of energy and the *Sarvakarana*, the root cause of all existence. It serves as the *BhutAtma* (soul) (the life of the five great elements), the *Indriyatma* (soul) (the life of the senses), and the *Pradhanatma* (soul) (the life of the body). Finally, as the *Lingattma* (soul), it carries the imprints of previous births into new bodies and is often referred to as *Purusha*, the 25th *Tattva* of evolution, which resides within the physical form.[8]

Two types of *Atma* (soul), one is *Jivatma* (soul), which is the master of the body, attains knowledge of

body only, should experience his own *karma*, has less energy than the other one and other is *Paramatma* (soul), which is the supreme soul of all souls, absolute knower of creation, most energetic, devoid of *Sukha*, *Dukkha*, etc.[9] In the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Paramatma* (soul) has six roles in the living body: role of observer (*Upadrashta*), role of one who permits the action of mind (*Anumanta*), role of Master (*Bharta*), role of The Almighty (*Maheshwar*), role of enjoyer (*Bhokta*), role of the soul of souls *Paramatma* (soul).[10]

The rationale for this study stems from the fact that although *Atma* is a vital component that defines life, it is often sidelined as pure metaphysics rather than clinical or holistic health discourse. This study unravels the enigma of *Atma* by examining its role in health and existence through the lens of classical Ayurvedic texts.

Methods and Methodology:

Referred to Classical *Samhitas* of Ayurveda like *Charaka Samhita*, *Susruta Samhita*, *Ashtangahridaya* and collected information from journals and also cross-referred books related Unveiling to Ayurveda like *Tarka Sangraha*, *Bhagavad Gita* and books on Indian philosophy to synthesize a comprehensive understanding of *Atma* (soul) 's role in health and psychosomatic constitution. Modern peer-reviewed journals were cross-referred to bridge classical theory with contemporary understanding.

Result

No one can define or describe the *Atma* (soul) correctly. The existence of *Atma* (soul) remains a mystery. It can be assessed with *Pramanas* like *Aptopdesha* (authoritative testimony), the elaborate explanation given in *Vedas* and *Samhitas*, *Anumana* (presence of life functions such as inspiration, expiration, and mental resolution *Yukti* logical reasoning), etc., and with *Parishesha Nyaya*, and the existence of *Atma* (soul) is proved.

Discussion

Atma (soul) is present in the body like *Taila* in *Tila*, *ghee* in *curd*, *agni* in *arani*, *water* in the *srotas* of the river.[11] It is *Vibhu* and *Avyaya*, hence it is invisible to ordinary eyes. The existence of the *Atma* (soul) within the living body is evidenced by various physiological, mental, and emotional functions that cease upon death.

Primarily, the presence of the soul is marked by the continuous process of respiration, consisting of *Prana* (inspiration) and *Apana* (expiration), along with the involuntary *Nimesha* and *Unmesha* (movements of the eyelids).

Its role as the sustainer of life is seen through *Jivanam* (livelihood) and the dynamic nature of the mind, including *Manaso gati* (travelling of the mind

from one object to another) and *Deshantargati* in *swapna* (travelling of the mind in dreams). The *Atma* (soul) also facilitates sensory and cognitive processing through *Indriyantarasanchara* (perception of different senses), *Prerana* (initiation of impulses), *Dharana* (retention of impulses), and *Drishtasya Dakshinenākshnā savyenāvagama* (bilateral knowledge of senses, where an object perceived by one eye is recognised by the other).

Beyond these physical signs, the existence of the *Atma* (soul) is proven by the spectrum of human experience and internal drive. This includes emotional responses such as *Iccha* (desires), *Dwesha* (aversion), *Sukha* (happiness), and *Duhkha* (unhappiness), which require a conscious entity to experience them. The soul's active engagement with the world is reflected in *Prayatna* (effort) and *Chetana* (liveliness), while its higher intellectual faculties are demonstrated through *Dhriti* (control over the senses), *Buddhi* (discriminative knowledge), and *Smriti* (memory).

Finally, the sense of individual identity, or *Ahankar* (ego), serves as a psychological anchor, and the inevitable transition of *Marana* (death or *panchatwam*) marks the definitive moment when these twenty-two features depart, confirming that the *Atma* (soul) was the animating force. *Atma* (soul) is neither born nor dead.[12]

Location of Atma

Acharya/Text	Seat of Atma	Key concept
1. Acharya Charak	<i>Hridaya</i> (heart)	Considered as the seat of consciousness and <i>Ojas</i> [13]
2. Acharya Sushruta	<i>Hridaya</i> (heart)	Described as the seat of <i>Sattva</i> and the location of consciousness [14]
3. Acharya Vagbhata	<i>Hridaya</i> (heart)	Follows the view heart is the root of life and the reservoir of consciousness [15]
4. Bhela Samhita	<i>Shira</i> (head)	Between the skull and the palate is the seat of the mind and the <i>Atma's</i> processing centre.[16]
5. Upanishads	<i>Hridaya</i> (heart) /Brahmarandhra	Describes the Atma residing in the cave of the heart or exiting through the crown of the head.[17]

Size of Atma

Darshan	Size	Term
1. Nyaya Vaisheshika	Infinite	Vibhu [18]
2. Advaita Vedanta (Shankara)	Infinite/limitless	Vibhu/Brahman [19]
3. Visistadvaita (Ramanuja)	Atomic	Anu [20]
4. Dvaita (Madhva)	Atomic	Anu [21]
5. Jainism	Varies with body	Deha parimana[22]

In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna provides a foundational analogy to explain the nature of Atma and the relationship with the body. Krishna says death is a changing of the costume, meaning merely a transition, and it is not end to existence.[23] Also says Atma is insurmountable and cannot be burnt, that is, it cannot be destroyed.[24] In the Katha Upanishad, Atma is compared to the passenger in the chariot, and the body is the chariot itself, with intellect as its charioteer and mind as the reins and the five senses as the horse. Highlighting that Atma is the master, it remains as a silent witness, while the mind and intellect navigate the world [25].

According to Ayurveda, a person is healthy when their biological systems are balanced, and their mind and *Atma* (soul) are in a state of lasting contentment.[26] Hence, in Ayurveda, the treatment *Naishtiki Chikitsa* refers to spiritual therapy that aims for permanent peace or liberation. While most of the treatment focuses on fixing the physical body or balancing the doshas, the *Naishtiki Chikitsa* believes that the root cause of all sufferings is attachment and ignorance. It is about reaching a state where no further disease or suffering can occur. The method involved here is total renunciation of worldly desires.[27]

The concept of the soul in modern medicine is a complex intersection of neuroscience, psychology, and palliative care. Unlike traditional philosophies

that view the soul as a distinct, metaphysical entity, modern clinical medicine generally approaches the soul through the perspective of the individual self.

In modern medicine, the traditional ‘soul’ is largely viewed through the clinical framework of the mind-brain relationship. Neuroscientists investigate how billions of neurons firing in the cerebral cortex give rise to a subjective self. When a patient suffers from neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer’s, clinicians observe the gradual erosion of personality, which raises profound ethical and medical questions about the location and nature of the human essence.

Furthermore, in palliative and end-of-life care, the soul is addressed through spiritual distress. Modern medicine acknowledges that healing is not merely the absence of pathology but the restoration of a person's sense of meaning. Recognising a patient's spiritual needs has been shown to improve clinical outcomes and quality of life, leading to the integration of multidisciplinary teams including trained healthcare professionals and psychologists.

The Quantifiable Soul, while surgery cannot "find" a soul, modern medical ethics protects the autonomy of the individual, which is the secular legal equivalent of respecting the soul. [28+85]. If the body is a biological machine, the Atma is the non-local consciousness that provides the spark of self-awareness, a phenomenon that modern neurobiology can describe but cannot yet fully explain.[29]

Modern health care focuses on the whole person to ensure technology doesn’t replace human

compassion. The *Sattvavajaya Chikitsa* treats neurodegenerative disease like Alzheimer's by restraining the mind from unwholesome objects. While neuroscience focuses on neuroplasticity, this approach empowers the *Atma* (soul). [30] By utilising *Jnana*(knowledge), *Vijnana* (analytic knowledge) and *Dhairya* (*patience*), clinicians align *Sattva*(mind) with the *Atma*(soul), fostering resilience and peace despite physical cognitive decline.

Conclusion

Thinking of *Atma* (soul) is like finally waking up to who one really is. While our body and mind constantly change, this inner "witness" stays steady, even when we die. In Ayurveda, we see death not as an end, but as a simple return of our physical elements to nature, while the soul remains untouched.

When one realises that we are this eternal spark connected to a much larger universal energy, our perspective on life shifts. Then the person stops chasing titles, possessions, or other people to feel "whole." By distinguishing the personal journey from this supreme source, one breaks the cycle of constant attachment. One will let go of the stressful need to control every outcome, which is where true healing begins. Living in alignment with one's natural purpose, or Dharma, brings a sense of freedom (Moksha) that physical medicine alone cannot provide. We aren't just a person struggling

through life, but we are the animating force connected to everything.

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