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An Exploratory Ayurvedic Conceptual Analysis of Ātma in the Context of Darśana and Upanishada

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ABSTRACT

The Upanishads are regarded as the foundation of Indian philosophical thought and represent some of the earliest systematic discussions on fundamental metaphysical concepts such as the nature of existence, the self, and ultimate reality. The historical roots of Ayurveda can be traced back to the Vedic tradition, within which it has evolved and flourished despite numerous historical challenges. For thousands of years, Ayurveda has remained a living and continuously practiced science, encompassing not only the prevention and management of physical ailments but also profound philosophical inquiries into life and the universal elements. According to Ayurveda, treatment is meaningful only in a living being, and life itself is sustained by Aatma. Aatma is an essential constituent of Ayu (life), without which existence is inconceivable. A critical examination of classical literature enables the extraction of essential insights regarding the concept of Aatma. The Upanishads emphasize that Aatma cannot be perceived through ordinary sensory awareness; it can be realized only when the senses are restrained, the mind is stabilized, and Buddhi (intellect) is free from desire, delusion, and duality, which otherwise obstruct true knowledge and discernment. Scholarly debates have emerged regarding whether the Upanishads themselves constitute philosophy or serve as the foundation upon which later Indian philosophical systems were constructed. Ayurveda, as a time-tested experiential science, integrates philosophical principles, clinical observation, logical reasoning, and research-based inquiry, all of which have been transmitted across generations through rigorous interpretation and practice. The functioning of the living body is attributed to Purusha or Jeevatma. Acharya Charaka describes Sattva (mind), Aatma (soul), and Sharira (body) as the Tridanda Sharira, the threefold support of life. These three entities together sustain existence, much like a tripod, and serve as the substratum for all physiological and metaphysical processes. Indian philosophical systems are broadly classified into Astika (those accepting the authority of the Vedas) and Nastika (those rejecting it). Buddhism, Jainism, and Charvaka belong to the Nastika tradition. In contrast, the Astika tradition of Sanatana Dharma comprises six philosophical systems—Sankhya, Yoga, Vedanta, Mimamsa, Nyaya, and Vaisheshika—collectively known as Shad Darshana. Each of these systems offers distinct perspectives on the nature of Aatma. Most Upanishads function either as commentaries on or extensions of the four Vedas and collectively form the basis of Vedanta, often described as the culmination of Vedic thought. Their defining features include universality, non-dogmatism, and an exploration of the highest metaphysical truths, culminating in a state beyond verbal expression—silence. As such, the Upanishads are considered the philosophical backbone of Hinduism. The concept of Aatma holds a central position in Indian philosophy and constitutes the core subject matter of the Upanishads. Aatma represents the eternal, indestructible essence inherent within the individual, persisting beyond death. Although interpretations of Aatma vary across different philosophical schools, the doctrines articulated in the Upanishads collectively form the nucleus of Indian philosophical thought, encompassing principles such as

Karma (action), Yoga (union), Punarjanma (rebirth), Moksha (liberation), Aatma (soul), and Brahma (supreme consciousness).

KEYWORDS: Ayurveda, Upanishads, Aatma, Vedic, Astika, Nastika.

INTRODUCTION:-

In Hindu philosophy, philosophical systems are broadly classified into two categories: Astika (those that accept the authority of the Vedas) and Nastika (those that do not). Buddhism, Jainism, and Charvaka constitute the three major Nastika schools, as they reject the Vedas as the fundamental source of philosophical authority. In contrast, the Astika tradition of Sanatana Dharma comprises six philosophical systems—Sankhya, Yoga, Vedanta, Mimamsa, Nyaya, and Vaisheshika—collectively known as Shad Darshana. Aatma, commonly referred to as the soul, is regarded as the vital life principle residing within living beings. It is an essential constituent of Ayu (life), without which existence is inconceivable. Aatma governs growth, behavior, consciousness, and the ultimate attainment of liberation (Moksha). The presence of Aatma signifies life and enables the unfolding of all life processes. In classical thought, Aatma is also considered a distinct dravya (substance). Therefore, a proper understanding of the nature and function of Aatma is indispensable for overcoming sorrow and attaining supreme happiness. The term Upanishad is derived from “Upa” (near) and “Ni” (definitely), signifying that knowledge which destroys ignorance (Avidya) and leads the seeker closer to Brahman, enabling its direct realization. The Upanishads aim to loosen worldly attachments and guide the aspirant toward spiritual liberation. The central theme of the Upanishads is the exploration of Aatma. From the Samhitas through the Brahmanas and Aranyakas, Brahman is discussed in various forms, but in the Upanishads it is expounded in relation to Aatma. In the Rigveda, Aatma is sometimes described as the fundamental conscious principle of the universe and at other times as the vital force within humans. The Upanishads further clarify that the universal consciousness pervading the cosmos (Brahman) and the consciousness within the individual (Aatma) are essentially identical. Vedic literature contains early reflections on life, karma, rebirth, and the continuity of the soul beyond death. While the Vedic sages acknowledged Aatma as distinct from the body and capable of transcending this world, their focus largely remained on worldly life. The shift toward renunciation and liberation became prominent during the Upanishadic period, when liberation began to be valued above worldly enjoyment. The sages of the Upanishads sought answers to profound questions regarding the creation of the universe and the supreme object of worship, ultimately identifying a singular, all-pervading reality as the ultimate truth. Thus, while the Vedas represent the ancient narrative of Vedic religion, the Upanishads constitute its philosophical culmination. Aatma is one of the most fundamental concepts in Indian philosophy and forms the core subject of the Upanishads. It denotes the eternal, indestructible essence inherent within the individual, persisting even after death. Different philosophical systems present varying interpretations of Aatma: Vaisheshika regards it as atomic (Anu), Nyaya views it as the bearer of karma, while the Upanishads describe it as “Anoraniyan Mahato Mahiyan.” In Advaita Vedanta, Aatma is characterized as Sat-Chit-Ananda and is inseparable from Brahman. The Upanishads emphatically reaffirm the unity of these two conscious principles. In the Brahmana and Aranyaka texts, Brahman and Aatma appear as distinct entities, with Brahman often associated with the cosmic or divine realm. However, the Upanishads dissolve this duality, presenting them as one and inseparable. While the Brahmanas and Aranyakas emphasize ritualistic deities, the Upanishads foreground Aatma or Brahmattva and convey the experiential realization of non-duality. Although the soul is ultimately indescribable and beyond conceptual understanding, the sages of the Upanishads have employed multiple metaphors and descriptions to guide seekers toward its realization.

MATERIAL AND METHODS: -

Aatma is imperceptible to the senses, yet its existence is acknowledged as a divine spiritual force residing within the body. The association between Aatma and Sharira (body) is essential for the existence of Jeevatma, and the striving of the living being toward liberation (Moksha) is intrinsically linked to Aatma. The relationship between Aatma and Sharira may be understood as analogous to the interdependence of Purusha and Prakriti. Vedic literature describes Aatma as the supreme, subtle spirit endowed with divine power and as the fundamental principle constituting the living universe.

According to ancient texts, Jeevatma functions through various constituents of Prakriti, including the Panchamahabhutas (five elements), Tanmatras, Karmendriyas, and psychological components such as Manas. Despite this association, the physical and psychological attributes of the individual remain distinct from Aatma. During the span of life, however, Aatma maintains a profound and inseparable association with the body. Aatma governs the spiritual disposition of an individual and significantly influences psychological attributes, thereby playing a crucial role in shaping spiritual, mental, and moral conduct.

Definition of Aatma: -

The term Aatma is derived from the Sanskrit roots “At” or “Ap” dhatu, which convey the meanings “to pervade,” “to move continuously,” or “to exist eternally.” The Kathopanishad describes Aatma through four fundamental aspects: as the knower of knowledge, as the entity that grasps and shapes objects of knowledge, as the initiator and experiencer of karma, and as the eternal principle that exists beyond time. In contrast to Achetana or Jada (non-conscious matter), Aatma is characterized as Chetana and Karta, wherein Chaitanyabhava (the essence of consciousness or life) is inherently present.

Synonyms of aatma: -

- Avyakta - Which is not clearly manifested
- Kshetranja - Which lodges in Kshetra (Body)
- Shaaswata - Which exists always
- Vibhu - Which is superior
- Purusha - Which is the base of everything
- Nitya - Which is eternal
- Shareeri - Which lodges in the shareera (Body)

Origin of Aatma: -

Aatma is described as having two principal forms (prakaras). Paramatma is unborn and imperishable, as its existence is Anadi (beginningless). In contrast, Jeevatma arises due to Moha (delusion), Iccha (desire), and Dvesha (aversion), in association with Karma. This embodied soul is referred to as Rashi Purusha, representing the individual consciousness bound within the cycle of birth and death.

Aatma Sthana (Seat of the Soul): -

According to the Bhagavad Gita and the teachings of Charaka, the principal seat of Aatma is the Hridaya (heart). However, the Shvetashvatara Upanishad emphasizes that Aatma pervades the entire body, just as oil is inseparably present within sesame seeds or ghee within curd. Vagbhata elaborates further by describing ten vital abodes of the soul, known as Dasha Jeevita Dhama: Shiras (head), Rasana Bandhana (tongue root), Kantha (throat), Asra (blood), Hrudaya (heart), Nabhi (umbilicus), Basti (urinary bladder), Shukra (reproductive tissue), Ojas, and Guda (anus). The Sarvanga Sundara commentary clarifies that these locations also serve as seats for Sharira (body), Indriya (sense organs), Sattva (mind), and Aatma, highlighting their inseparable coexistence.

Aatma Sankhya (Numerical Concept of Soul): -

Regarding the numerical nature of Aatma, Sushruta holds that Aatma is Bahusankhya (multiple), whereas Charaka asserts that Aatma is singular, eternal, and universal.

Aatma Lakshana (Characteristics of the Soul): -

According to Tarka Sangraha, Aatma is the Adhikarana (substratum) of Jnana (knowledge). Charaka describes Aatma as Nirvikara (unchanging), Drashta (the observer), and the source of consciousness when associated with Mahabhutas and Indriyas. It is Avyakta (unmanifest) and beyond direct sensory perception. Acharya Atreya enumerates several indicators that affirm the presence of Aatma in living beings, including respiration, blinking of the eyes, mental translocation, shifting of attention among sensory objects, voluntary control of mind and senses, anticipation of death, cross-sensory cognition, desire, aversion, pleasure, pain, effort, consciousness, stability, intellect, memory, and ego. These attributes collectively signify life and consciousness and are absent in a dead body. Upon the departure of Aatma along with its associated faculties, the body becomes devoid of consciousness and inert. Aatma itself cannot be directly perceived and is eternal. Knowledge (Jnana) arises only when Aatma is properly associated with Manas, Buddhi, and the Indriyas. In the absence of any one of these, true cognition cannot occur. This relationship is explained through a classical simile: just as a clear reflection cannot be obtained from a mirror covered with dust, similarly, distorted mental conditions obstruct the manifestation of knowledge. The Bhagavad Gita further declares that Aatma can neither be cut by weapons, nor burned by fire, nor moistened by water, nor dried by wind. Although formless, limitless, and devoid of physical attributes, Aatma eternally exists as the imperishable essence of life.

Aatma bhed: -

- Vishnu purana – Bhootatma, Indriyatma, Pradhanatma, Jeevatma, Paramatma
- Bhagavat gita – Kshara, Akshara
- Tarka sangraha – Jeevatma, Paramatma
- Ayurveda – Parama Purusha, Ativaahika Purusha, Raashi Purusha

Jeevatma: -

Jeevatma is the individual, embodied consciousness manifested distinctly within each living physical body. It functions through Sattvika karanas, namely the instruments of action such as Manas (mind), along with various Bhavas (psychophysical attributes). Jeevatma undergoes rebirth in accordance with accumulated Karma, that is, actions performed in previous lives, and consequently experiences the results of both virtuous and sinful deeds. Owing to this experiential role, the individual soul is described as Phala-bhokta, the experiencer of the fruits of action.

Paramatma: -

Paramatma denotes the supreme, universal consciousness with which all individual souls are intrinsically related. It is synonymous with Ishwara (God) and is therefore regarded as the ultimate divine principle. Paramatma is described as Sarvajna (omniscient) and Eka (one without a second). It is also referred to as Parabrahma or Sarva-bhava-rahita Parama Purusha, signifying the absolute, attributeless, and transcendental supreme being.

Aatma Parimaana (Extent or Dimension of the Soul): -

Divergent philosophical views exist regarding the Parimaana (dimension or extent) of Aatma. The Shvetashvatara Upanishad describes Aatma as possessing both Anu Parimaana (extremely subtle or minute) and Mahat Parimaana (cosmic or all-pervading), indicating its dual experiential nature. Scholars of Vedanta Darshana assert that Paramatma is Parimaana-rahita (dimensionless and infinite), whereas Jeevatma is of Madhyama Parimaana (intermediate extent). According to Nyaya Darshana, Aatma is also regarded as possessing Madhyama Parimaana. In contrast, Jain philosophers maintain that the extent of the soul varies in accordance with the dimensions of the body it inhabits.

❖ Aatma in the Vedas and Upanishads: -

Vedas: -

The concept of Aatma finds its earliest literary expression in the Rigveda. In his commentary on Rigvedic hymns, the ancient grammarian Yaska defines Aatma as the all-pervading principle, the organizing force that integrates various components of the organism, and the ultimate sentient reality. Thus, even in the Vedic period, Aatma is conceived not merely as an individual entity but as the fundamental conscious principle underlying life and the cosmos.

Upanishads: -

1. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: -

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad is the largest, oldest, and one of the most philosophically significant Upanishads. Through extensive metaphysical dialogues, symbolic narratives, and cosmic illustrations, it elucidates the nature of Aatma and Brahman and establishes their omnipresence. The celebrated dialogue between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi forms the philosophical core of this text, wherein supreme knowledge of the Absolute Self is imparted. This Upanishad presents, for the first time with clarity, the doctrine of the unity of Brahman and Aatma. The Self is described as the ultimate refuge that liberates beings from ignorance, sorrow, attachment, old age, and death. Realization of this truth leads an individual toward renunciation and the life of a Parivrajaka or Sannyasi, free from attachment to progeny, wealth, or heavenly pleasures. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad strongly affirms the omnipresence of Aatma, declaring that all gross and subtle entities of the universe are manifestations of Aatma or Brahman. The essence of all existence is the Self, and nothing transcends it. This text also offers the most detailed exposition of rebirth, describing the processes of death, transmigration, and karmic continuity. At death, the vital forces converge upon the Aatma, which departs from the body through the heart, eyes, head, or other exits, accompanied by one's knowledge, actions, and impressions. Accordingly, beings are reborn in accordance with their karma—virtuous actions lead to auspicious births, while sinful actions result in unfavorable rebirths—summarized in the principle that desire shapes intention, intention shapes action, and action determines destiny.

2. Chandogya Upanishad: -

The Chandogya Upanishad is another extensive and influential Upanishad that emphasizes the supremacy of knowledge through illustrative narratives and experiential teachings. It elaborates the realization of Aatma through the Mahavakyas, grounding metaphysical truth in direct spiritual experience. The Upanishad narrates the episode in which Prajapati imparts self-knowledge to the gods and demons through their representatives, Indra and Virochana. The final teaching reveals that the true Self is immortal and indestructible, distinct from the physical body. While embodied, the soul experiences pleasure and pain due to its association with the body; however, liberation is attained when the Aatma transcends bodily identification and attains freedom from dualities, resulting in supreme bliss.

3. Katha Upanishad: -

The Katha Upanishad is renowned for its philosophical depth and narrative elegance, centered on the dialogue between Yama and Nachiketa. This Upanishad glorifies self-knowledge, underscores the impermanence of worldly pleasures, and illustrates the rigorous testing of a disciple's eligibility for spiritual wisdom. The narrative describes how Nachiketa, honoring his father's words, reaches the abode of Yama and waits there without food for three days. Pleased with

Nachiketa's patience and discipline, Yama grants him three boons. The first restores harmony between Nachiketa and his father; the second grants knowledge of the sacrificial fire that leads to heavenly realms; and the third concerns the profound question of whether the soul exists after death. Despite Yama's attempts to dissuade him through worldly temptations, Nachiketa remains steadfast, recognizing their transient nature. Ultimately, Yama imparts the highest knowledge of Aatma, revealing it as eternal, indestructible, and beyond sensory perception. This dialogue stands as one of the most authoritative expositions on the nature of the soul and the path to liberation.

4. Mandukya Upanishad: -

The Mandukya Upanishad is the shortest among the Upanishads, yet it presents one of the most profound analyses of consciousness. It delineates the four states of human experience—Jagrat (waking), Swapna (dream), Sushupti (deep sleep), and Turiya (the transcendental state). The entire universe is manifested through Pranava (Om), which encompasses the past, present, and future. The Aatma is described as having four padas (quarters), corresponding to these four states. In the waking state (Vaishvanara), consciousness is outward-directed, operating through the gross body with seven limbs and nineteen channels, including the sense organs, organs of action, vital forces, and internal faculties. In the dream state (Taijasa), consciousness becomes inward-directed and experiences subtle objects. In deep sleep (Prajna), consciousness is unified, blissful, and undifferentiated. The fourth state, Turiya, is beyond description—neither inward nor outward, neither cognitive nor ignorant. It is characterized as Shivam, Shantam, and Advaitam. The Upanishad affirms that Om is Brahman and that the Aatma is identical with Brahman.

5. Kena Upanishad: -

The Kena Upanishad consists of four sections, the first two in verse form and the latter two in prose. It establishes the transcendence of Aatma as distinct from the body and identifies it as the motivating force behind the senses and the mind. The Upanishad declares that Brahman is that which enables hearing, seeing, thinking, and speaking, yet itself remains beyond sensory perception. It emphasizes that Brahman is not what the senses apprehend, but that by which the senses function. True knowledge of Aatma arises not from mere intellectual learning but through inner realization. The Upanishad states that one who realizes this truth attains immortality, whereas knowledge devoid of self-realization remains incomplete, comparable to wandering in darkness.

6. Taittiriya Upanishad: -

The Taittiriya Upanishad is divided into three sections: Shiksha Valli, Brahmananda Valli, and Bhrigu Valli. The Brahmananda Valli provides a systematic exposition of Pancha Kosha—Annamaya, Pranamaya, Manomaya, Vijnanamaya, and Anandamaya—illustrating progressive layers of existence through which the seeker approaches the realization of Brahman. The Bhrigu Valli narrates the instruction given by Varuna to his son Bhrigu, guiding him through experiential inquiry toward the understanding of Brahman as supreme bliss. The Upanishad emphasizes that beyond the physical and mental sheaths resides the Vijnanamaya principle, leading ultimately to the realization of Anandamaya Brahman.

7. Aitareya Upanishad: -

The Aitareya Upanishad begins with the declaration that in the beginning only Aatma existed, and nothing else. From this singular consciousness arose the creation of the universe. The Upanishad describes the process of creation and the entry of the Supreme Self into the human body through the cranial aperture known as Vidriti or Brahmarandhra, regarded as the seat of bliss and realization of Brahman. The second chapter explains the threefold birth of a human being—birth in the womb, physical birth into the world, and rebirth through progeny. The third chapter presents an exposition of consciousness and knowledge, asserting that all material and mental phenomena originate from Aatma. The Upanishad further associates the realization of Aatma with the three states of experience—waking, dreaming, and deep sleep—viewed as relative from the standpoint of ultimate knowledge. True realization transcends these states and leads to immortality.

8. Isha Upanishad: -

The Isha Upanishad, also known as Ishavasya Upanishad, emphasizes the harmonious integration of knowledge (Jnana) and action (Karma) for the attainment of the highest philosophical goal. This synthesis later came to be known as Jnana-Karma-Samuccaya Vada. The ultimate aim of the Upanishad is the realization of the supreme non-dual reality. It declares that one who perceives all beings in the Self and the Self in all beings transcends hatred, attachment, and sorrow. For the enlightened individual who experiences unity everywhere, grief and delusion cease to exist, as all distinctions dissolve in the realization of oneness.

9. Prashna Upanishad: -

The Prashna Upanishad is structured as a dialogue between teacher and disciples. Six seekers of Brahma-knowledge—Suksha, Satyakama, Soumaryani, Kaushalya, Vaidarbihi, and Kabandhi—approach the sage Pippalada with sacrificial

fuel and inquire about the nature of Aatma and Prana. Kaushalya questions the origin of Aatma, its entry into the body, and its governance over physiological and cosmic functions. Pippalada explains that Aatma emanates from Paramatma, much like a shadow arises from the body. It enters the body through mental intention and establishes its functional aspects (Ansha) as the vital forces and sense organs. The Aatma resides in the heart, which contains one hundred and one principal channels (Nadis), each branching into thousands of sub-channels through which Vyana Vayu circulates. Through Udana Vayu, the soul ascends to higher realms according to one's karmic deeds—virtuous actions lead to heavenly realms, sinful actions to lower realms, and mixed deeds to rebirth in the human world.

10. Mundaka Upanishad: -

The Mundaka Upanishad presents the concept of Saprancha Aatma through profound symbolic imagery. It describes Jeevatma and Paramatma as two birds residing on the same tree (the body). While the Jeevatma partakes of the fruits of action, the Paramatma remains a detached witness. The Upanishad asserts that Aatma can be realized only through truthfulness, austerity, right knowledge, and celibacy. It is inaccessible to the weak-minded or those relying solely on ritualistic practices or mechanical penance. Only the disciplined and enlightened seeker, purified through spiritual effort, attains union with Brahman.

11. Shvetashvatara Upanishad: -

The Shvetashvatara Upanishad synthesizes Jeeva, Ishvara, and Prakriti into a unified metaphysical framework, collectively referred to as Brahman. It affirms that the soul is devoid of gender and remains unchanged regardless of the body it inhabits. The Upanishad symbolically describes the subtle size of the Jeeva as one-hundredth of one-hundredth part of the tip of a hair, emphasizing its extreme subtlety while affirming its real existence.

12. Kaushitaki Upanishad: -

The Kaushitaki Upanishad refers to the soul as Pragyatma, the conscious principle that pervades the entire body. Just as a razor remains enclosed within its sheath or a bird within its nest, the soul resides within the body, extending its presence throughout, even to the hair and nails, sustaining life and consciousness.

13. Maitri Upanishad: -

The Maitri Upanishad distinguishes between two forms of soul: the pure, immutable soul and the empirical soul influenced by virtuous and sinful actions. The pure soul governs bodily functions much like a potter operates a wheel, while the body itself is inert, comparable to a cart. Aatma is described as eternal, peaceful, unborn, and independent; it illuminates the body with consciousness, making inert matter appear sentient. Through such interpretations, the Upanishads collectively elaborate the foundational doctrine of Aatma, which profoundly shaped Indian philosophical traditions, both Astika and Nastika, culminating in the six orthodox systems known as Shad Darshana.

14. Atma Upanishad: -

The Atma Upanishad is a minor Upanishad associated with the Atharvaveda and classified as a Samanya Vedantic Upanishad. Also known as Atmopanishad, it is listed as the 76th Upanishad in the Muktika canon. Presented as a discourse by the sage Angiras, the text expounds a tripartite classification of the Self: the external Self (Bahya Aatma or physical body), the internal Self (Antar Aatma or individual soul), and the supreme Self (Paramatma or Brahman). The external Self comprises the physical organs responsible for perception and action and is subject to birth and decay. The internal Self is the conscious principle that perceives the five elements, engages in cognition, emotion, memory, desire, fear, pleasure, and pain, and discriminates among philosophical doctrines. Manas and Chitta constitute its essential components. The highest Self, Paramatma, is symbolized by Om and realized through yogic practices such as Pranayama and withdrawal of the senses. It is described as partless, spotless, changeless, desireless, all-pervading, and beyond the effects of karma. The Upanishad emphasizes that Paramatma cannot be understood through division or analysis, just as the essence of a seed cannot be grasped by fragmenting it. It is eternal, unborn, indestructible, free from attributes (Nirguna), untouched by sensory impressions or ego, and transcendent to both the outer and inner selves.

❖ Aatma in the Darśanas: -

Astika Darśanas: -

Astika Darśanas represent the orthodox systems of Indian philosophy that accept the authority of the Vedas. The term Astika is derived from the Sanskrit word asti, meaning “that which exists.” In contrast, Nastika schools reject Vedic authority, the varna system, and the primacy of Brahmanical tradition. Buddhism, Jainism, Ajivika, and Charvaka are categorized as Nastika philosophies.

The six Astika philosophical systems, collectively known as Shad Darśana, are Sankhya Darshana, Yoga Darshana, Nyaya Darshana, Vaisheshika Darshana, Mimamsa Darshana, and Vedanta Darshana. Each system presents a distinct yet interrelated interpretation of Aatma.

1. Sankhya Darśana: -

Sankhya philosophy, rooted in Upanishadic thought, propounds the doctrine of Purusha-bahutva—the plurality of souls. According to Sankhya, Purusha is pure consciousness (Chit) and absolute existence (Sat), devoid of attributes and modifications. Bondage arises due to the association of Purusha with Prakriti, while liberation (Moksha) is attained through complete detachment and discrimination between the two. Purusha is distinct from Avyakta (unmanifest Prakriti) and its evolutes, as all associations and experiences of pleasure, pain, and delusion exist for the sake of another—namely, Purusha. Acharyas explain this distinction through the principle of Trigunadi-viparyaya, indicating that Purusha transcends the three gunas. The existence of Purusha is inferred from the fact that experiences such as happiness and sorrow require an experiencer who is distinct from the instruments of experience. Since intellect (Buddhi) itself undergoes pleasure and pain, there must be a conscious entity separate from it. Birth, death, individual differences, and variations in sensory arrangements further establish the plurality of Purusha.

2. Yoga Darśana: -

In Yoga Darśana, Patanjali defines Aatma (Purusha) as Shuddha Drashta—the pure, immutable seer. Consciousness is self-luminous and does not require any external qualifier to establish its nature. Knowledge of external objects arises through the mediation of Buddhi, following the sequence of sensory contact (Indriya), mental reflection (Manas), ego (Ahankara), and intellect (Buddhi), a process known as Karana-vritti. Although Buddhi reflects knowledge, true experience belongs only to Purusha, as experience presupposes consciousness. Pleasure and pain are not modifications of Purusha but are witnessed by it. The soul remains unaffected and unchanged by these experiences. The Yoga Sutra affirms this by describing Aatma as Shuddhah Pratyayanupashyah—pure and undistorted observer. While Purusha depends on Buddhi for cognition of external objects, it remains fundamentally distinct: Buddhi is inert, mutable, and instrumental, whereas Aatma is conscious, immutable, eternal, and the true enjoyer. Their proximity is necessary for experience but does not imply identity.

3. Nyaya Darśana: -

According to Nyaya philosophy, Aatma is the substratum (Ashraya) of desire (Iccha), aversion (Dvesha), pleasure (Sukha), pain (Dukha), and knowledge (Jnana). Annambhatta describes Aatma as the locus of knowledge through the Samavaya (inherent) relationship. Nyaya recognizes two types of soul: Paramatma (Ishvara), who is singular and omniscient, and Jeevatma, which is plural and limited in knowledge. Both are eternal substances. Nyaya philosophers reject Dehatma-vada (identifying the body as the soul) through several logical arguments: the perishability of the body, continuity of memory despite bodily change, the presence of pleasure and pain in newborns, and the absence of consciousness in dead bodies. The usage of the pronoun “I” further establishes Aatma as distinct from body, senses, and mind. Expressions such as “I know,” “I desire,” and “I suffer” indicate a conscious substratum that cannot be identified with inert elements, time, space, or mind. Thus, Aatma alone is the conscious entity that underlies cognition and experience.

4. Vaisheshika Darśana: -

Vaisheshika philosophy, founded by Kanada, offers a systematic proof for the existence of Aatma. The objects of sensory perception are known, but the senses themselves are merely instruments (Sadhana). Just as a weapon requires a wielder, the senses require a conscious agent. The body, composed of inert atomic substances (Paramanus), cannot be conscious. Since consciousness (Chaitanya) cannot arise from non-conscious matter, it must belong to a distinct substance—Aatma. Knowledge itself serves as proof of the knower. Shankara Mishra explains that diverse sensory cognitions converge in a single conscious agent, denoted by the expression “I.” This unified awareness cannot be attributed to multiple inert organs. Thus, the existence of Aatma is established through inference, independent of scriptural testimony (Agama Pramana). Aatma, as the knower and experiencer, is free from logical fallacies and stands as a valid metaphysical entity.

5. Mimamsa Darshana: -

The Mīmāṃsā school affirms the existence of Aatma as a distinct and eternal substance, separate from the body, sense organs, and mind. Aatma is imperishable and functions both as Karta (doer) and Bhokta (enjoyer of actions). It is omnipresent in the sense that it exists as the witnessing consciousness underlying all experiences. Being the very essence of knowledge, Aatma transcends the limitations of space and time and serves as the ultimate knower. According to Mīmāṃsā, the soul migrates from one body to another and is distinct in each individual due to the diversity of experiences and karmic impressions. Consequently, the existence of multiple Jeevatmas is accepted. This plurality is essential to account for the distinction between bound and liberated states; if the soul were singular, liberation of one would imply liberation of all. Aatma is considered Swaanubhavadagamyā (self-experiential) and Manapratyakshagamyā (directly apprehended through inner awareness). The eminent Mīmāṃsā philosophers Kumarila Bhatta and Prabhakara concur on the plurality of souls and regard Aatma as the substratum of knowledge.

6. Vedanta Darshana: -

Vedānta Darśana presents diverse interpretations of Aatma and the Supreme Reality based on different metaphysical standpoints. Prominent Vedāntic philosophers include Adi Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya, Madhvacharya, Vallabhacharya, and Nimbarkacharya. Each system elaborates a distinct relationship between Jeevatma and Paramatma, ranging from absolute non-dualism to qualified and dualistic interpretations, thereby enriching the philosophical discourse on the nature of the Self.

Nāstika Darśanas: -

Nāstika Darśanas comprise philosophical systems that do not accept the authority of the Vedas as the ultimate source of knowledge. Buddhism, Jainism, and Charvaka are the three principal Nāstika schools of Indian philosophy.

1. Charvaka Darshana: -

Charvaka Darśana categorically rejects the existence of any imperceptible or supersensory Aatma apart from the Chaturbhūtamaya Śarīra (body composed of the four elements). According to this school, the physical body itself is the Aatma, a doctrine known as Dehātmavāda. Acharya Madhava supports this view by pointing out that common expressions such as “I am tall” or “I am dark” refer only to the body, indicating that the body is identified as the self. Similarly, Haribhadra Suri argues that no independent, imperceptible soul can be accepted apart from the directly perceivable Pañcabhūtika Śarīra. Since the physical and mental states vary from one body to another, Charvaka philosophers deny the possibility of a single, transcendent Aatma underlying all experiences. They also question the existence of Aatma in a dead body, as consciousness is no longer evident after death.

Charvaka Darśana further elaborates its position through various materialistic interpretations-

Indriyātmavāda (Sensualism):

In ordinary language, individuals identify themselves with sensory limitations, using expressions such as “I am blind” or “I am deaf.” Based on such usage, Charvaka philosophers equate the sense organs (Indriyas) with the self, asserting that consciousness arises from sensory functioning.

Mano-chaitanyavāda (Psychicism):

Another Charvaka view considers the mind (Manas) as the basis of all bodily activity. When the mind enters a state of deep sleep, the body becomes inactive, suggesting that mental activity alone accounts for consciousness and cognition.

Prāṇātmavāda (Vitalism):

With deeper observation, Charvaka thinkers acknowledge the vital role of Prāṇa. As long as Prāṇavāyu remains within the body, life persists; when it departs, both body and sense organs become inert. Thus, Prāṇa is regarded as the sustaining principle of life. Despite these variations, all Charvaka positions remain firmly grounded in materialism. Body (Śarīra), senses (Indriya), mind (Manas), and vital force (Prāṇa) are all ultimately reducible to the Mahābhūtas. Consequently, Charvaka philosophy does not transcend the physical domain and remains confined to perceptible reality.

Anātmavāda (Denial of the Soul):

Charvaka philosophy fundamentally rejects the existence of an eternal Aatma distinct from the body. It argues that if a soul were to leave the body after death and migrate elsewhere, it should be drawn back by emotional attachments to loved ones, which is evidently not observed. Thinkers such as Acharya Madhusudana and Neelkantha also maintain that consciousness is a property of the living body itself and that no separate supersensory soul exists. According to Charvaka epistemology, only Pratyakṣa Pramāṇa (direct perception) is valid, while inference and scriptural testimony are unreliable. Since Aatma is not directly perceivable, its existence is rejected. However, it must also be acknowledged that the non-existence of Aatma cannot be conclusively proven through mere non-observation. Thus, while Charvaka Darśana denies the soul due to lack of direct evidence, it simultaneously reveals the epistemological limitation that absence of perception does not necessarily establish absence of existence.

2. Jain Darshana: -

Jain Darśana was well established by the 6th century BCE and was systematized and revitalized by Mahavira. According to Jain philosophy, liberation (Nirvāṇa or Mokṣa) is attained through the Triratna—Right Faith (Samyak Darśana), Right Knowledge (Samyak Jñāna), and Right Conduct (Samyak Cāritra). Jain thinkers explain the structure of reality through seven fundamental Tattvas: Jīva (conscious principle), Ajīva (non-conscious principle), Āsrava (influx of karma), Bandha (bondage), Saṃvara (cessation), Nirjarā (shedding of karma), and Mokṣa (liberation). Among these, Jīva and Ajīva constitute the living and non-living categories of existence.

Jīva Tattva-

In Jain philosophy, the conscious self or soul is termed *Jīva*. It possesses life, consciousness, cognitive capacity, and sensory power. In its pure state, *Aatma* is endowed with perfect knowledge and perception (*Nirvikalpa* and *Savikalpa Jñāna*). However, due to the influence of karma, the soul functions in empirical existence under various conditions such as *Aupashamika*, *Kṣayopashamika*, *Audayika*, and *Pāriṇāmika* states. These karmic conditions obscure the true nature of the soul, resulting in its manifestation as *Saṃsārī Jīva*. Jain philosophy distinguishes between *Bhāva* (unmanifest or internal state) and *Dravya* (manifest or external state). Every phenomenon is examined from both the *Niścaya* (absolute) and *Vyavahāra* (practical) perspectives. The doctrine of *Pariṇāmavāda* (transformation) asserts that all substances continuously undergo modification while retaining their essential identity.

Qualities of *Jīva*-

Jīva is the experiencer of its own actions (*Karma-phala-bhoktā*). From the absolute standpoint, *Aatma* is formless, intangible, and characterized by consciousness and perception. Though bound by karma, consciousness never ceases. The soul expands or contracts according to the size of the body it inhabits—becoming vast in an elephant and minute in an ant—yet remains inherently formless and imperceptible to the senses. *Jīva* is described as *Avayavī* (possessing parts) and *Astikāya* (having spatial extension). Though infinite knowledge, perception, and power inherently exist in the soul, these qualities remain obscured due to karmic coverings. The two primary attributes of *Jīva* are *Cetanā* (consciousness) and *Upayoga* (functional application of consciousness). *Upayoga* is of two types—*Jñānopayoga* (cognitive awareness) and *Darśanopayoga* (perceptual awareness).

Pratikṣaṇa Pariṇāma and Anekāntavāda-

Jain philosophy maintains that the soul undergoes moment-to-moment transformation (*Pratikṣaṇa Pariṇāma*), yet its essential nature remains unchanged. This leads to the doctrine of *Anekāntavāda* (non-absolutism), which asserts that reality possesses multiple aspects. While bodily forms change across divine, human, animal, or hellish states, the soul itself is never destroyed. Only the modes (*Paryāya*) change, while the substance (*Dravya*) remains eternal, retaining its *Dhruvya* (permanent) nature.

3. Bauddha Darshana: -

Bauddha Darśana is founded on the teachings of Gautama Buddha, a non-theistic philosophical system that does not emphasize the existence or non-existence of God. Buddha neither affirmed nor categorically denied a permanent soul; instead, he propounded the doctrine of *Anātmavāda* (non-self). After attaining enlightenment, Buddha delivered his first sermon at Sarnath to the *Pañcavargiya Bhikṣus*, expounding the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. His second major discourse elaborated the doctrine of *Anātmavāda*, wherein he systematically denied the identification of *Aatma* with the five aggregates (*Pañca Skandha*): *Rūpa* (form), *Vedanā* (sensation), *Samjñā* (perception), *Samskāra* (mental formations), and *Vijñāna* (consciousness). Buddha taught that none of these aggregates can be regarded as the self, as they are impermanent, subject to disease, suffering, and change. If any of them were the soul, they would be free from suffering and fully controllable, which is not the case. Therefore, all aggregates—past, present, or future; internal or external; gross or subtle—must be understood as “not mine,” “not I,” and “not my self.” Through insight into this truth, the *Ārya Śrāvaka* develops *Nirveda* (disenchantment), leading to detachment (*Virāga*) and ultimately liberation (*Nirvāṇa*). Upon liberation, the practitioner realizes that the cycle of birth and death has ceased and that no further action remains to be accomplished. Thus, Buddhism emphasizes liberation through the realization of non-self, detachment, and cessation of suffering. In essence, the entire philosophical framework of Buddhism is oriented toward the experiential understanding of *Anātmavāda*, which forms the core of Buddha’s soteriological teaching.

DISCUSSION: -

The diverse philosophical systems of Indian thought—whether *Astika* (those accepting Vedic authority) or *Nastika* (those rejecting it)—are not isolated or mutually antagonistic traditions. Rather, they exist in a continuum, each occupying a necessary position within the broader intellectual evolution of Indian philosophy. All *Darśanas*, despite their methodological and doctrinal differences, share a common aspiration: the realization of the highest truth. Each system complements the others, contributing uniquely to the collective philosophical enterprise. Their apparent differences represent stages of inquiry rather than irreconcilable opposition. Among the *Nastika* systems, *Charvaka Darshana* represents the earliest materialistic approach. Also known as *Lokāyata*, it emphasizes sensory perception (*Pratyakṣa*) as the sole valid means of knowledge and advocates the pursuit of happiness in worldly life. Traditionally attributed to *Charvaka*, the author of the *Bārhaspatya Sūtra*, this school flourished in the late centuries BCE. Although its original texts are no longer extant, later critiques by other philosophical schools form the primary basis for reconstructing its doctrines. Early references by thinkers such as *Śaṅgānī* and *Buddhaghosa* (5th century CE), and later by *Purandara*, *Kamalaśīla*, and *Haribhadra*, attest to its historical influence.

Charvaka philosophers deny the independent existence of a supersensory soul, identifying the self variously with the gross body, sense organs, vital breath (*Prāṇa*), or mind. However, as philosophical inquiry deepens, such explanations

prove inadequate for the serious seeker (*Jijñāsu*). Consciousness appears irreducible to mere material components, prompting the search for a distinct, autonomous principle. This marks the transition to the Nyāya–Vaiśeṣika standpoint, which affirms the soul as a separate, conscious substance underlying cognition and experience. Yet even this position does not fully satisfy the seeker of the Supreme Reality. Jain and Buddhist philosophies, the principal Nastika systems, advance the inquiry further by rejecting Vedic ritualism while offering profound ethical and metaphysical insights. Jain philosophy affirms the eternal existence of the soul (*Jīva*), bound by karma yet capable of liberation through disciplined conduct and right knowledge. Buddhism, founded on the teachings of Gautama Buddha, adopts a radically different approach through the doctrine of *Anātmavāda*. Buddha neither affirmed nor denied a permanent soul; instead, he deconstructed the notion of self by analyzing the five aggregates (*Skandhas*) and demonstrated that clinging to any of them as “self” leads to suffering.

In his sermons at Sarnath, Buddha expounded the *Four Noble Truths* and the *Eightfold Path*, followed by his discourse on non-self. He taught that liberation arises not from metaphysical speculation but from direct insight into impermanence, suffering, and non-attachment. Yet Buddhism does not collapse into nihilism. The realization of *Nirvāṇa*, described as *Asaṃskṛta Dhātu*—the unconditioned and imperishable state—points to a transcendent reality beyond empirical consciousness. At a deeper level, the Buddhist *Anātman* and the Upanishadic Aatma converge conceptually. The witnessing, immutable, and non-agent Self of the Upanishads—*Kūṭastha, Nirvikalpa*, untouched by karma—is symbolically described as the bird that does not eat the fruit while residing on the same tree. What Buddhism negates is not this transcendental consciousness, but the ego-bound, craving-driven notion of self.

The Astika Darśanas further refine this understanding. Sāṃkhya and Yoga distinguish between *Puruṣa* (pure consciousness) and *Prakṛti* (material nature), identifying consciousness as transcendent and unaffected. Mīmāṃsā upholds the soul as eternal and distinct from intellect and senses. Advaita Vedānta, systematized by **Adi Shankaracharya**, declares the soul to be self-evident and identical with Brahman, requiring no external proof. Qualified non-dualistic and dualistic Vedāntic schools—propounded by Ramanuja, Nimbarka, and others—offer nuanced interpretations of the soul’s relationship with the Supreme. This dynamic philosophical progression continues into modern Indian thought. Swami Vivekananda emphasized the soul’s inherent freedom, declaring it eternally pure, complete, and divine by nature (*Sat-Chit-Ānanda*). According to him, bondage is a misconception born of ignorance; the soul is never truly bound. Mahatma Gandhi, though not a philosopher in the formal sense, grounded his moral and political philosophy in spiritual self-realization, emphasizing truth, non-violence, and self-purification as expressions of soul-centered living.

Collectively, these traditions affirm that the human being is not merely a physical entity but a manifestation of a deeper spiritual principle. Recognizing oneself as Aatma—and the body and mind as instruments—leads to ethical living, ecological responsibility, and universal compassion. When humanity perceives itself as separate from nature, exploitation follows; when it understands itself as an integral part of the universal consciousness, harmony becomes inevitable. The Upanishads occupy a central place in this philosophical landscape. They represent the culmination of Vedic thought and the foundation of Vedānta. As observed by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the Upanishads simultaneously continue and critique earlier ritualistic religion, establishing spiritual monism guided by intuitive realization rather than mere rationality. Composed between approximately 800–400 BCE, they articulate doctrines of karma, rebirth, liberation, soul, and Brahman with unmatched depth and universality. Through symbolic narratives—such as the two birds on a tree (Mundaka Upanishad) and the chariot metaphor (Katha Upanishad)—the Upanishads distinguish between the empirical self and the true Self. The empirical self is bound, mutable, and subject to suffering; the true Aatma is eternal, witnessing, and unaffected. The ultimate realization is their identity with the Supreme Self. In essence, Indian philosophy presents a living, evolving tradition rooted in freedom of inquiry, depth of introspection, and spiritual humanism. Its Darśanas, ancient and modern, collectively affirm that liberation is attained not by external authority but by inner realization of the Aatma—the supreme truth residing within.

CONCLUSION: -

Aatma is a fundamental dravya responsible for life, activity, cognition, birth, and rebirth. Its presence is indispensable for the manifestation of consciousness and for therapeutic intervention, thereby establishing it as the most vital among the Nava Kāraṇa Dravyas. The various synonyms of Aatma indicate its intimate association with Śarīra (body) and Manas (mind). This relationship may be best understood through the Paṅgu–Andha Nyāya, which illustrates their mutual dependence for purposeful function. The classifications related to the type, number, and extent (parimāṇa) of Aatma collectively indicate that Aatma is singular, eternal, and all-pervading; apparent multiplicity arises only due to upādhi-bheda (conditioning adjuncts). Opinions regarding the sthāna (seat) of Aatma further support its omnipresence, suggesting that it exists throughout the body, permeating even the minutest unit (anu). Aatma is eternal and indestructible, and the distinction between a living and a dead body is recognized through the presence or absence of Aatma-lakṣaṇas, a concept of fundamental importance in cikitsā (therapeutics). A clear understanding of Aatma as the governing principle of life enables individuals to pursue a balanced and meaningful existence. Since Aatma sustains life itself, it is also the foundation of healing and treatment. The Upanishads provide the most profound contemplative

vision of the soul. While the seeds of self-inquiry are found in the Vedic Saṃhitās, the Upanishads may be regarded as the Gaṅgotrī—the primary source—of self-realization. The central theme of the Upanishads is Aatma, wherein the conscious energy pervading the universe (Brahman) is identified as identical with the conscious principle within the individual. In the Brāhmaṇa and Āraṇyaka texts, Brahman and Aatma are often presented as distinct, with greater emphasis on deities and ritualism. In contrast, the Upanishads transcend this duality and emphasize direct experiential realization (aparokṣānubhava) of non-difference (abheda). The Upanishadic shift from outward ritualism to inward contemplation does not negate the empirical world but integrates it within a higher metaphysical understanding. Thus, the Upanishads represent a mature inward quest for truth without abandoning the realities of worldly existence. Indian philosophy, rooted in the Vedic tradition, evolved into two broad streams—Jñāna Kāṇḍa and Karma Kāṇḍa. The former is elaborated in the Āraṇyakas and Upanishads, while the latter finds expression in the Brāhmaṇa texts. This evolution gave rise to a multidimensional philosophical framework that is simultaneously spiritual and rational, theistic and atheistic, idealistic and materialistic. Accordingly, Indian philosophical systems are classified as Āstika (accepting Vedic authority) and Nāstika (rejecting it). The six Āstika systems—Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta—collectively known as Ṣaḍ Darśana, offer complementary perspectives on the nature of Aatma. The Nāstika systems—Cārvāka, Jainism, and Buddhism—arose largely as responses to Vedic orthodoxy and ritualism. While Cārvāka rejects the existence of a supersensory soul altogether, Jainism and Buddhism, despite denying Vedic authority, retain profound ethical and metaphysical insights and remain philosophically closer to the Āstika traditions than to materialism. All these philosophical systems, whether Āstika or Nāstika, are interrelated and represent successive stages in humanity's quest for ultimate truth. They are not mutually exclusive but mutually enriching. Each Darśana contributes uniquely to the understanding of Aatma and existence, forming a continuous and dynamic intellectual tradition. This integrative vision underscores the depth, tolerance, and evolutionary character of Indian philosophy, wherein diverse viewpoints coexist to illuminate the eternal truth of Aatma.

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