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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### THE CONCEPT OF ATMAN IN HINDUISM AND JAINISM

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#### ABSTRACT

Hinduism and Jainism are the two major religions in India. Both have different doctrines and concepts about spiritual life. And the concept of atman is mentioned a lot in their theories. For example, in Hinduism and Jainism there is the notion of the ordinary soul and the liberated soul. Further, the concept of karma is what that distinguishes the mundane soul from the liberated soul. This is the system of thoughts and practice that safeguard the soul from one life to the next. So in this article I would like to present some of the concepts of atman of Hinduism and Jainism.

#### INTRODUCTION

What is the purpose of life? And where will our soul go after we die? These are questions that have been asked from very early time in human existence. This is because of the suffering while living in this world and the fear of not existing after death. Therefore, there are different doctrines and beliefs that are developed to accommodate this need. For example, in Hinduism and Jainism there is the notion of the ordinary soul and the liberated soul. Further, the concept of karma is what that distinguishes the mundane soul from the liberated soul. This is the system of thoughts and practice that safeguard the soul from one life to the next. Nevertheless, this essay will explore the similarities and differences regarding the concept of atman in Hinduism and Jainism. As Max Muller stated, "He, who knows one, knows none." Therefore, an examination of Hinduism and Jainism, will allow one to broaden one's own perspective on the concept of soul.

#### The concept of atman in Hinduism

##### a)...Individual atman (soul)

There is a spark of Brahman in every man, and this is called "atman" or soul. The soul is not controlled by the body, and it does not die when the body dies. However, the event of death is only a phase that marks the disintegration of the physical body. The individual soul is clothed with the subtle and causal bodies. Therefore, at death, it seeks a new material form to express its distinguishing natures and to experience the results of previous actions.

In other words, the soul is subject to the cosmic law of karma, which determines a person's destiny. Karma is the total effect of a person's actions, good and evil. However, Hindus believe that every soul is capable of reaching the ultimate goal—union with Brahman. Because of this, Hindus strive to their full ability thus to achieve good karma, since karma determines a person's life and soul's future destination. Therefore, it is necessary for Hindus to live in accordance to the Dharma. That is to live within the Hindu's code of conduct. Each Hindu is expected to carry out his/her religious duty, family responsibilities and work. It is mainly through the Dharma that the individual soul gradually makes its way towards the final liberation. Nevertheless, the soul is believed to remain intact "with its gross and causal bodies until the attainment of *moksha*," and when it is freed from these bodies, the soul is no longer subject to *samsara*. Therefore, liberation has been essential to every Hindu. The belief that the atman (soul) experiences various reincarnations; taking on one form to another; to fulfill the Dharma and to break the cycle of rebirth. Thus, only when the cycle of *samsara* (birth, death, and rebirth) is broken, the final stage, *moksha* has been reached. At this stage, the soul (atman) is reunited with Brahman, the universal soul. In other words, the soul merges with the "absolute spirit" just as rivers merge into the great ocean.

##### b)...Brahman/Para-Atman (the Universal Soul)

"Brahman is a great mystery; and yet He is the simple, easy truth. Brahman is the Soul of our soul. He is our very Self. He is the inner ruler. He is the indwelling one." This is to say, Brahman is the universal soul which is otherwise called the

“ultimate reality” is “mostly unseen, hidden to the senses, and even to rational thought.” However, he is omnipresent, which means he is everywhere; he is in every sentient being’s innermost self or atman. Many scholars have described Brahman differently. For example, Sivananda describes Brahman as “smaller than the small, greater than the great... It is the Soul of the ant... the Soul of the elephant. It is the Soul of the universe. It is Over-soul too. It is the Soul of the sinner and also of the saint. It is the Soul of the soul; it is the Supreme Soul. It is the Supreme Purusha. It is Chaitanya.” Bowen in his book *Themes and Issues in Hinduism* illustrates Brahman as, “the one eternal, all-pervading and all-transcending principle of the universe and all creation.” In the Upanisad, the Brahman is described as:

Does not move and yet is faster than mind; it is far and yet near; it is outwards and yet inwards to us. Those men who take to the life of action (*karma*) are ignorant and enter the worlds of darkness; but they also who give up action and take to meditation on gods go to the same worlds. One should overcome death through action and attain immortality through meditation. The moral is that through action we purify our minds, when only meditation will succeed. The passage above insisted that, Brahman is conceived of as having many attributes, functions, forms, manifestations and names, one and many, form and formless, immanent and transcendent, male and female. At the same time, it is the oneness of all bases and multiplicity. The mystery of this lies behind ignorance and maya (illusion), the veil that stops human from seeing all these aspects/features of Brahman from within themselves. In other words, Brahmin is within the reach of all.

**c)...The process from atman (individual self) to the Brahman (universal self)**

The true goal of a Hindu’s life is to get back to the source from which one came. That is to reunite with Brahman (the universal soul) the ultimate reality. Similarly, just as all leaves will fall to the ground and all rivers will flow back to the ocean, atman, the individual soul will merge with Brahman the universal soul. According to Sivananda, the sole object of life is the attainment of self-realization or absolute freedom. The aim of man’s life is to unfold and manifest the “true self” which is eternally existent within him. Thus, to lose all sense of distinctive personality, discrimination and prejudice, unveiled Maya (illusion) and be dissolved in the Universal self. From this, the soul can attain the attainment of the Infinite Life, and it is the supreme purpose of finite life. This goal can be achieved through various types of yoga, *karma yoga*, *jñāna yoga*, or *bhakti yoga*, which are Hindu ways of life. The first way of life is *karma-yoga*, the way of ethical action. The second way of life is *jñāna-yoga*, the way of knowledge. The third way of life is *bhakti-yoga*, the way of devotion. In the Bhagavadgita XII.8—11:

Fix your mind on Me only, place your intellect in Me, [then] you shall no doubt live in Me hereafter. If you are unable to fix your mind steadily on Me, then by *abhyasa-yoga* [repetitive practice of withdrawing the mind from material objects] do seek to reach Me. If you are unable to practise *abhyasa* even, be intent on doing actions for Me. Even by doing actions for My sake, you shall attain perfection. If you are unable to do even this, then taking refuge in Me, abandon the fruit of all action.

In other words, the way of life is the way man idealizes his life to realize a value, in this case it to attain moksha. As Rodrigues exemplifies, “Yoga itself may be understood as meaning moksha, because yoga refers to both a spiritual path to Self-realization and its goal.”

***Karma yoga the path of right action***

Karma literally means action and result, but it also includes the subtle forces which are understood to be generated by all voluntary actions, and which are seen as capable of producing results in the future. It is karma that bound the soul to birth, death and rebirth samsara. The concept of *karma* can be basically understood as the moral ethical sphere of the physical law of causation. It implies that all actions, from small to big; from subtle, latent or gross, have the potential to engender future results. Just like an apple seed, when it is sown in the ground, it has the potential to grow into an apple tree and produce apple fruits. Every action, physical, verbal or mental, literally gives rise to immediate effect. Likewise, it intrinsically creates an impact on the refined body, which bears the fruit in due course. This result, all depends on the nature and quality of the action. Moreover, it is exemplified by the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, from what one does, that is what one becomes. Therefore, if one does well, one becomes righteous, if one acts badly one becomes evil. To put it simply, a good action bears pleasant results, a bad action bears dreadful consequence.

Therefore, to attain moksha, right conduct is quintessentially important. This is the *karma yoga path*, is the way of ethical action. This moral path is taken up by Hindus as “religious rituals.” This is done by living according to the dharma and fulfills the obligation so that the self would attain liberation and union with Brahman. Bowen in his book *Themes and Issues in Hinduism* explains that action carried out for the reward of its fruit in the form of pleasures and pain chains a man to the world. Only when action is produced without attachment, without interest of its fruit, that a man is free from the world. This is to say, by nonattached action, man can completely exhaust all karma and liberate the soul from the gross body, release it from samsara and merge with the infinite self—Brahman.

***Jñāna-yoga the path of knowledge (wisdom)***

The second way of a Hindu’s life is the way of knowledge, *jñāna-yoga*. This is a conscious way to recognize Brahman and fuse with the Supreme Being through one intellectual mind. This is a Hindu life’s ideal, and to many, it is the primary way. Consciously, one should have knowledge of his *atman* (soul/self) to be able to purify it thus to have communion with Brahman. There are different ways that one can purify it. Through ethical action, one purifies the mind, reason and the soul. Through devotion that is love of God, and surrender to him enable one to raise above the ignorance self. However, if one was to think deeply, the course of action and the way of devotion is the way of knowledge. In other words, through knowledge, one carries out devotion and right conduct for salvation (moksha). According to Sivananda, “You are really an Emperor of emperors, but you have become a beggar on account of various desires.” This is to say that everyone has the spark of Brahman, but is ignorant and does not realize that nature themselves. Thus, the “Destruction of root ignorance (*mulavidya*) is the destruction of finitude and the attainment of infinitude.” It is the knowledge (*jñāna-yoga*) that allows us to

unveil maya and eradicate ignorance. However, “One should remind oneself that the way of knowledge is not the way of intellectual convictions or beliefs, but that which reveals the deeper levels of [one] being itself, of [one] finite “I am,” and so of [one] existence.”

In as much as it has been said above, *jñāna-yoga* is a path that is designated for philosophers and thinkers. These are people who do not believe in faith or accept other powers as a grace to substitute for their personal realization of the highest truth. Therefore, daily rituals such as devotional singing, offering flowers and fruit are not for them. Instead, they only value reasoning and logic as the method of searching the truth. Basically, their rational mind wants to disclose the puzzle of existence and experience the Reality, that is to gradually fuse one with the Universal Being (*brahman*). Thus, “the quest is for the realization of the inner self (*atman*) and for identifying it with the Universal Self (*paramatman*),” are predominantly on the self-effort.

In sum, *jñāna-yoga* is held in especially high regard by early Hindu philosophers. By others, this path has also been interpreted as involving the study of religious teachings on liberation. It is important to know that although the word *jñāna* is literally translated in English as knowledge, in the context of *jñāna yoga*, “It refers not merely to mundane intellectual knowledge, but to a transcendental ‘knowing’ of the Absolute, which is a deeply experienced truth, and which provides meaning to the facts and data that constitute our gathered information about the world.”

### ***Bhakti yoga the path of love and devotion***

The third way of life is the way of devotion *bhakti yoga*. This is the way of love, and service to God. It is a total contrast to karma yoga, the course of voluntary action, which is to perform an act and not adhere to its fruit. But how can the common man act without attachment to and concern about the results? It is also, totally opposite to *jñāna-yoga* because it relies on other powers instead of self-power. It is the way of faith, by having faith in God and completely surrendering to God in love and devotion. Thus, a question is raised as to how devotion and love lead to moksha? In relation to this, a well-known Hindu philosopher, Ramanuja explains as follows:

...one’s dependence on God leads to an acknowledgement of God, as the only object worthy of adoration, and to a loving and unbroken remembrance of God (*dhruvasmrtih*). This attitude of intense love and self-surrender (*prapatti*) towards God, when combined with the performance of obligatory rituals, pleases God whose grace (*prasada*) brings about the final liberation of the soul. Through grace, ignorance and karma are destroyed and the soul comes into immediate knowledge of God.

In simple terms, through bhakti yoga, one always thinks and remembers God. By sincerely thinking of God, one will carry out rituals according to the dharma of God. From this action, God blesses with grace that destroys ignorance and karma and allows one’s soul to comprehend to be united with Brahman—the universal soul. Furthermore, emphasis by another well-known Hindu philosopher Madhva is that, “liberation of the [atman] is neither through knowledge nor through works, but solely through the grace of God (*Isvaraprasada*).” This is because, “Bhakti-yoga teaches [one] how to love, without any

ulterior motives, loving God and loving the [virtuous] because it is good to do so.”

### **The concept of atman (Jiva) in Jainism**

#### ***a)...The ordinary atman***

According to Jain’s teachings all beings have a soul, that is to say, from Celestial beings, humans, the inhabitants of the underworld to animals and plants. In general, the term for soul in Jainism is *jiva*, which means live. It is also synonymous with the term *atman* as soul or self in Hinduism. Jain believes that each atman is eternal and not connected to any other atman in anyway. Thus, when the atman attains moksha (liberated) it does not merge to anything big or superior. This is because Jain does not believe in the Supreme Being— God the creator. However, atman the soul is connected to karma. Karma is the interaction between matter that sticks to the atman and hides or obscures it from its true essence. In other words, “Jiva or atman, so long as it feels desire, hatred and other attachments, and is fettered by karma, undergoes continual reincarnation.”

However, to Jain’s understanding, atman itself is flawless, unchanging, self-contained bliss, perfect knowledge in nature, but because it is stuck to the matter that prevents it from liberation. As Stevenson put it, “The jiva which suffers or enjoys the fruits of its deeds, and then, in consequence of the karma it has acquired, goes through the succession of rebirths, and finally, obtaining freedom through the destruction of its karma, soars upwards to moksha.” However, according to Dunda’s explanation, the way to liberation is through:

[The] path of self-discipline that can progressively effect the “warding off” (*samvara*) of the influx of new *karma* and the “wearing away” (*nirjara*) of that *karma* which has already been bound. When a human being...destroys the harming *karmas* through the fire of asceticism (*tapas*), he gains pure omniscience and becomes an omniscient *kevalin*...When the karmically dictated period of life reaches its end, the *jiva* leaves its human shell to gain liberation (*moksha*) and moves in one instant to the roof of the universe, where it dwells in a state of pure energy, bliss, and knowledge along with but separate from all the other liberated (*siddha*) *jivas*. Thus, to liberate the soul, one must disassociate from matter and renounce worldly attachment. From this, the new matter then stops sticking to the soul while the old matter will decay away. In sum, the soul will be free from bondage and gain liberation by asceticism.

#### ***b)...Atman the liberated soul***

According to the book *The Heart of Jainism*, Stevenson elucidates, “When the atman is freed from all bondage to karma and has passed for ever beyond the possibility of rebirth, it is said to have attained *moksha* or complete deliverance.” In general in an Indian context, a person that has got rid of all karma, bondage, and attains moksha is called a Siddha or perfected. Importantly, in Jain’s concept, “only a human being can directly become a Siddha.” Furthermore, in Jainism, there is a more specific term used for those who have gained deliverance. The original term was *Tirthakara* or *Tirthankara*, as to denote those who have crossed the ocean of worldly illusion (*samsara*) or reached the farther shore of deliverance. Jains believe that, when one is liberated, the atman (soul) rises to *Ishatpragbhara*, which is heaven. There is no further contact with the world. It’s living together with other liberated souls

but as separate identities. In other words, once the atman is liberated it is no longer subject to birth, death, and rebirth; instead it transcends to heaven and lives there eternally.

### c)... *The process from atman (Jiva) to liberation*

All of Jain's teachings, practice and belief can be expressed under a concise heading "*Ratna Traya*" *The Three Jewels*. This is namely, *Samyak Darsana-right faith, Samyak Jnana-right knowledge, and Samyak Caritrya- Right conduct*. Right Knowledge is, in fact, supremacy of the Jaina creed; this is the first gem one must obtain before any other gems can be comprehended. It is only when Right Knowledge is gained before a man can know what virtue is, and what vows he ought to keep. The gem that comes after right knowledge is "right faith"; for unless one believes in what one knows, one must have faith in what one follows (Jain doctrines and practice) will deliver one to the other shore. As Stevenson put it, "*Samyak Darsana* stands for true faith and insight into the great Jaina doctrines and scriptures." In other words, it is like the number, which, standing in front of the ciphers that follow it, gives them value. In a similar way, without faith all conduct is worthless. Nevertheless, it is right conduct that is the most powerful gem; it is the essential tool that delivers one to the other shore, from samsara to moksha. One may argue that, There may be Right Knowledge and Right Faith, but if these are not accompanied by Right Conduct, all are worthless. To the monk Right Conduct means the absolute keeping of the five great vows. His conduct... should be perfect, or Sarva-caritrya, for he must follow the conduct laid down for him in every particular [way]...

In sum, right-faith can be understood as having a clear view point and belief so as to realize that one is stuck in samsara and cannot get out. Right-knowledge is the correct understanding of *jiva*, *ajiva*, matter, karma and so forth. In other words, it is to comprehend Jain's teachings regarding samsara and how to get out or how to liberate oneself. Right-conduct is the principal practice; it is essentially the basis of what one Jain has to do such that of "*ahimsa*" to attain *moksha*.

### *Ahimsa-non violence*

Central to Jain *Ratna Traya (the three jewels)* is the ethical principle *ahimsa*, the word literally means non-violent. *Ahimsa* is an abstemious rule of absolute no killing such that not to kill any kind of life. No matter how low the life being may be. For example, "mendicants are required to abstain from all forms of violence to all six kinds of living organisms (earth beings, water beings, fire beings, wind beings, vegetable beings, and mobile beings)." The mendicant is enjoined to avoid both gross and subtle forms of violence. In other words, one should not cause harm to anything that has *jiva* or soul because it is violating the great ethical principle *ahimsa*. Jain monks go to the extreme in terms of practicing *ahimsa*. "Not to kill anything in the *Ekendriya* class, and hence refuse to touch water, clay, a clod of earth, fire, [and so on]." For survival to practice the *dharma*, they cannot of course help breathing air, but minimize the harm to as little as possible by covering their mouths with a cloth. This is to be worn all the time to prevent the killing of insect life in the air. Furthermore, Jain's monks do not snap their fingers, or fan themselves. Rather, a list of right conduct is prescribed as daily rituals. These are known as *avasyaka*, the six obligatory actions:

1. *Samayika*, a meditative attentiveness that pervades the mendicant's life.
2. *Caturvimsati-stava*, a hymn of veneration of the twenty-four Jinas.
3. *Vandanaka* or *guru-vandana*, a rite of veneration of one's mendicant leader.
4. *Pratikramana*, a rite by which a person ritually negates the karmic impact of words, actions, and thoughts.
5. *Kayotsarga*, a form of standing meditation in which one mentally "abandons the body" in order to focus upon one's spiritual core, and
6. *Pratyakhyaana*, a vow to perform certain karmically efficacious acts.

Practically, these six are all interweaving and interrelated. As a whole, these are obligatory actions with aspiration to create virtuous life. They constantly protect one against the many ways that can cause harm to the six kinds of sentient being (those that possess *jiva*). This decreases the mass of karmic coming in that binds the soul. Although, *ahimsa* is a very strict practice, it is impossible not to commit any harm at all. However, Cort insists that when one continuously courses in asceticism, it is believed to cancel the effect of old karmic influx and eventually release the soul from its fetters. In other words, by arduously practicing asceticism, the soul will gain liberation *moksha*. In a similar way, Stevenson says, Jain believes that it is also because of ignorance that stops the soul from liberation. And, to liberate the soul one must go through the way of asceticism and good actions so that one can annihilate ignorance. As one has done this, one again has "omniscience" and obtains infinite knowledge such that the mind can recollect all the births that one has gone through. Furthermore, the atman is freed from all bondage created by karma and has passed forever beyond the possibility of rebirth. Thus, it is said to have attained *moksha* or complete deliverance. In sum, Jain's process to *moksha* structure sounds like a descriptive framework of ethical value. However, there is much more in the religious practice. It is a prescriptive model for Jain's behavior. It provides a blue print for a Jain lives and behaves according to the ethical concept—*ahimsa*. The greater one commits to this ideology, the more one will use it to shape and inform one's behaviors. According to what has been said above about this ideology, the logical result of such commitment would deliver one to the other shore—*moksha*.

### Conclusion

To recapitulate, it is obvious that there are many points of similarities and differences in Hinduism and Jainism on the concept of Atman. They both insist there is a mundane atman and the perfect atman. This indicates that the human soul has the capacity to evolve from its impure states to that of a flawless state. That is ever-perfect, all-powerful and can transcend above the state of birth, death, and rebirth. Both, Hinduism and Jainism teach that ignorance and karma stop the mundane atman from its liberation. However, for Hinduism, this ignorance and karma can be destroyed through various types of *yogas* *karma yoga*, *jñāna yoga*, and *bhakti yoga*. These are basically Hindu's paths to *moksha*. On the other hand, Jain eradicates ignorance and karma by coursing in *ahimsa*, which is the way of non-violence and asceticism. Furthermore, Hindus believe that when the atman is liberated, it is then reunited with the universal soul Brahman. In contrast, for Jain, when the atman is free from all bondage, it transcends into *Ishatpragbhara* (heaven paradise) and lives there with other freed souls forever as separate identities.

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