



The Enduring Self In Indian Philosophy: A Historical And Systematic Defence Of The Nyāya Conception Of Ātman

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Abstract

The nature of the self has occupied a foundational place in Indian intellectual history, from the earliest Vedic compositions to the systematized philosophies of classical darśanas. This article traces the evolution of the idea of the self, beginning with early Vedic cosmology, Brāhmaṇa ritual speculation, and the profoundly introspective Upaniṣadic literature, before surveying its reinterpretation in Sāṅkhya-Yoga, Jainism, Buddhism, and Āyurveda. Against this broad backdrop, this article offers a detailed reconstruction and defense of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika theory of ātman as a permanent, non-material, substantive self that persists through changing mental states and personal experiences. Classical Nyāya arguments from memory, recognition, agency, desire, and moral responsibility are reformulated in contemporary philosophical terms and deployed against the Buddhist doctrine of anattā and momentariness (kṣaṇikatva). The article concludes that the Nyāya position—grounded in metaphysical realism, a robust theory of cognition, and pragmatic commitments to knowledge and liberation—offers the most coherent and philosophically defensible account of personal identity in the Indian tradition.

Keywords

Ātman; Nyāya; anattā; Upaniṣads; Vedas; personhood; self; consciousness.

Introduction

Few philosophical questions have exerted a deeper influence on Indian thought than the inquiry into self-nature. Whether framed as *ātman*, *puruṣa*, *jīva*, or *puggala*, the question “What is the self?” lies at the heart of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and soteriology across the Indian intellectual landscape. Nearly every major school of philosophy—orthodox (āstika) and heterodox (nāstika)—addresses this question with seriousness and systematic rigor. Yet the answers vary dramatically. While the Upaniṣads assert an inner, eternal *ātman*, Buddhism famously denies any enduring subject. Sāṅkhya distinguishes *puruṣa* from *prakṛti*; Jainism posits a multiplicity of conscious substances; and Āyurveda frames personhood in terms of embodied constitution (*prakṛti*) governed by interactive *doṣas*.

Amid these perspectives, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika theory of self remains uniquely compelling. A bold realist system, Nyāya affirms an enduring substantive self-known inferentially through its qualities, the unity of experience, and the coherence of personal identity over time. This article traces the historical roots and

philosophical developments that culminate in this powerful theory, and then critically defends Nyāya's position against its principal rival: the Buddhist doctrine of *anattā* (no-self).

The Vedic and Saṃhitā Period: Proto-Concepts of Self and Cosmic Person

The earliest stratum of Indian literature—the Ṛgveda, Sāmaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda—does not explicitly articulate a philosophical concept of the individual self. Instead, it presents a vast mythological and cosmological panorama centred on powerful deities and cosmic forces. What later becomes a metaphysical inquiry into subjectivity begins here as a symbolic meditation on the relationship between the cosmos and a primordial being.

The Puruṣa Sūkta and the Cosmic Person

The Ṛgvedic Puruṣa Sūkta (RV 10.90) describes a primordial *puruṣa* whose thousand heads, eyes, and feet permeate the universe. He is both immanent and transcendent—one quarter manifest, three quarters unmanifest. Through his sacrificial dismemberment arises the cosmos and its social order. The “person” here is not an empirical human being but the macrocosmic principle of all existence.

This early conception lays two crucial foundations:

- **The linkage between cosmic order and personhood**
- **The intuition that the self, in some sense, transcends empirical individuality**

The term *puruṣa* thus begins its career as a cosmological symbol rather than a psychological or subjective entity.

The Brāhmaṇas: Ritual Speculation and the Germ of Inner Subjectivity

With the Brāhmaṇa texts, we enter a period where sacrificial thought dominates. The cosmos is maintained by ritual, and ritual is a microcosmic reenactment of creation. *Puruṣa*, *Agni*, *Brahman*, and *Prajāpati* become interconnected symbols of creative power. Although not yet focused on personal identity, the Brāhmaṇas introduce crucial themes:

The Early Upaniṣads: Interiorization of the Sacrifice and Discovery of the Inner Self

The Upaniṣads mark a turning point: from ritual to introspection, from cosmic sacrifice to self-inquiry (*ātma-vicāra*). They constitute the first explicit philosophical exploration of the self in India.

Ātman as the Inner Witness

Texts such as the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BU) and *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (CU) identify the self as the innermost subject of experience. Yājñavalkya's famous *neti neti* teaching (BU 3.9.26) negates all empirical attributes to reveal an unconditioned witnessing subject.

Ātman–Brahman Identity

The grand equation “*tat tvam asi*” (CU 6.8–16) identifies the individual self with the ultimate reality. This metaphysical monism profoundly influenced the Vedānta tradition.

Experiential unity and continuity of the self

Repeated descriptions of the self as unborn, deathless, and immutable suggest the first fully formed theory of a permanent self in Indian philosophy.

Later Upaniṣads and the Consolidation of Self-Theory

Later texts such as the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* and *Maitrī Upaniṣad* integrate Sāṅkhya metaphysics, Yoga psychology, and early theistic ideas.

Key developments include:

- **The jīva as the enjoyer of karma**
 - **The self as non-gendered and subtle**
 - **The five-sheath (*pañca-kōśa*) theory**, differentiating bodily, vital, mental, intellectual, and bliss layers
- This conceptual foundation sets the stage for later classical systems.

Classical System Philosophies and Views of the Self

By roughly the first millennium BCE to the early centuries CE, the major philosophical systems (*darśanas*) systematized their doctrines.

Sāṅkhya-Yoga

Sāṅkhya posits a plurality of conscious selves (*puruṣas*) distinct from unconscious prakṛti. The puruṣa is passive, eternal, and unchanging—the witness of mental phenomena. Yoga adopts this ontology but emphasizes experiential realization through meditative practice.

Jainism

Jain metaphysics affirms innumerable jīvas, each an eternal conscious substance entangled with karmic matter. Unlike Nyāya, Jainism views consciousness as an essential property of the self at all times, even in deep sleep.

Āyurveda

Classical Āyurveda (Caraka, Suśruta) conceptualizes personhood through *doṣic* constitution (*vāta*, *pitta*, *kapha*), integrating physical, mental, and temperamental aspects. Though not a metaphysical system, it presupposes a conscious subject whose continuity grounds disease, behavior, and moral agency.

Early Buddhism: The Doctrine of Anattā

Buddhism rejects all metaphysical selves. Instead, the person is a causal aggregate of five skandhas. Continuity is causal, not substantial. This doctrine becomes the principal opponent of Nyāya in debates on personal identity.

The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika Conception of the Self

Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika stands out among classical systems for its thorough metaphysical realism and robust epistemology. Its concept of ātman is both systematic and empirically grounded.

Ātman as a Substance (Dravya)

Nyāya classifies the self as one of the nine substances (*dravya*). It is:

- **Eternal**
- **All-pervasive**
- **Non-material**
- **The substratum of cognitions, desires, volitions, and moral qualities**

Consciousness is not the essence of the self but a **quality (guṇa)** produced when the self, mind, and sense organs come into proper contact with an object.

Infinite Plurality of Selves

There are infinite selves, each associated with a particular body and mind. This explains individual memory, responsibility, and liberation.

Ātman Known by Inference

Because the self is not directly perceptible, its existence is established through inference:

- From desire
- From aversion
- From effort
- From memory
- From recognition
- From moral responsibility

These arguments are central to the Nyāya defense of personal identity.

Nyāya's Classical Arguments for the Self

This section presents the major Nyāya arguments in clarified and strengthened forms.

The Memory Argument (Smṛti)

Memory requires a subject who experienced an event and now remembers it. If only momentary events exist (as Buddhism claims), no past experience could be appropriated as “mine.”

Nyāya concludes:

- Memory presupposes diachronic identity
- Diachronic identity presupposes a continuing self

The Recognition Argument (Pratyabhijñā)

Recognition (“This is the same person I saw before”) requires a synthesizing subject capable of binding past and present cognitions.

The Desire–Effort–Action Argument

Desire for future pleasure presupposes the agent anticipates *its own* enjoyment. A momentary self cannot plan, act, or bear responsibility.

The Moral Responsibility Argument

Karma requires a subject who performs actions and later experiences their results. Without a continuing self, moral order collapses.

The Unity of Consciousness Argument

Cognition is sequential, but it forms a coherent stream only through the presence of an enduring experiencer. Together, these arguments present a powerful cumulative case for the self.

Nyāya’s Defense Against Buddhist Anattā

Buddhism argues:

- The person is a flux of momentary mental states (*kṣaṇika-vijñāna*)
- No enduring self exists
- The illusion of self-arises from causally connected events

Nyāya responds point by point.

Causal Connection Cannot Produce Ownership of Experience

Even if one momentary cognition causes another, causality cannot generate *personal appropriation*.

Causation explains succession, not subjectivity.

Deep Sleep and Discontinuity Challenge the Stream Theory

If consciousness is momentary and continuous, what happens in deep sleep?

Nyāya argues:

- Consciousness ceases
- The self does not
- The reemergence of memory after sleep proves persistence of self

The Problem of Moral Responsibility

If “I” of yesterday and “I” of today are different, the one who suffers consequences is not the one who acted—making ethics impossible.

The Problem of Knowledge and Liberation

If no self exists, who is liberated?

Who practices the Eightfold Path?

Nyāya accuses Buddhism of practical inconsistency: soteriology requires a subject.

Internal Contradiction in the No-Self Doctrine

To assert “There is no self,” Buddhists must presuppose a knowing subject.

Nyāya argues that the very denial of self requires a self-capable of denial.

Comparative Evaluation

Nyāya vs. Upaniṣads

Both affirm an enduring self but differ in metaphysics:

- Upaniṣads: self as pure consciousness
- Nyāya: consciousness as a quality of a substantial self

Nyāya vs. Sāṅkhya

Both affirm plurality and eternality of selves.

Nyāya, however, incorporates a more realistic epistemology and allows for unconscious states.

Nyāya vs. Vedānta

Advaita identifies ātman with Brahman; Nyāya rejects monism as incompatible with multiplicity of experience.

Nyāya vs. Buddhism

Nyāya defends the self as necessary for cognition, memory, ethics, and liberation. Buddhism's causal account is insufficient to explain ownership of experience.

Nyāya vs. Āyurveda

Āyurveda's phenomenological account of constitution complements Nyāya's metaphysical self, offering a holistic view of embodied personhood.

Conclusion

Across three millennia of Indian philosophical inquiry, the concept of the self has undergone profound transformations—from cosmic symbolism in the Vedas to radical skepticism in Buddhism. Amid this diversity, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika conception of ātman stands as the most philosophically coherent account of personal identity. By grounding the self in a substantive, enduring reality that underlies changing mental states, Nyāya successfully explains memory, recognition, agency, ethical responsibility, and the very possibility of knowledge and liberation. When viewed against the historical and systematic backdrop of Indian thought, the Nyāya theory offers not only a rigorous metaphysical model but also a deeply humanistic understanding of persons as knowers, doers, and moral agents in a structured universe.

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Footnotes

1. When discussing the Upaniṣadic view of the self as the inner witness and the “neti neti” teaching, cite:
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