



# Spirit and Atman: A Cross-cultural Examination

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**Abstract:** This essay undertakes a comprehensive exploration of the concepts of the inner being in Christian and Hindu thought, delving into the intricate interplay between the empirical world and the subjective realm. Through a comparative analysis of Anne Stevenson's, *The Spirit is Too Blunt an Instrument* and Adi Shankaracharya's *Atmabodha*, the essay endeavors to uncover similarities and differences between the notions of spirit and *Atman*. Stevenson's work may be seen as a contemporary Western understanding of the spirit, while Shankaracharya's text delves into the exploration of self-realization and the nature of the *Atman* from a Hindu perspective. By conducting a thorough examination of these ideas, the essay contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricacies and philosophical inquiries surrounding the concepts of spirit and *Atman*, and suggests that the idea of spirituality in the West is different from the concept of *atma-vidya* in *Dharma* traditions.

**Index Terms - Anne Stevenson, Adi Shankaracharya, spirit, Atman, Atmabodha**

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, philosophers have grappled with the question of the meaning of life. Thinkers as well as ordinary people, have continued to ponder over and ask questions about life, like "Who am I?", "What is the purpose of life?" and "Is there something beyond our physical bodies?" This inquiry has led to the development of various philosophical subfields such as metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, logic, and aesthetics. Platonism, one of the most influential ancient schools of Western thought based on the teachings of Plato (c. 428-347 B.C.), proposed that life's meaning is derived from attaining knowledge of the ultimate form of the Good (Menn 1992, pp. 543-546). Kierkegaard (1813-1855), similarly, emphasized the idea of fervent obedience to God as the purpose of life, and one had to surrender to divine guidance and lives in accordance with God's will (Moore, 2002, p. 7). Nietzsche (1844-1900), on the other hand, posited that life is devoid of inherent meaning or value, and argued that the traditional conceptions of meaning and purpose are human creations rather than objective truths (Eagleton, 2008, p. 9). In the same way, in ancient India, the *Charvaka* school of philosophy, accepted only empirically verifiable and perceivable matter as reality and denied ideas like afterworld, liberation and supreme reality (Chattopadhyaya & Gangopadhyaya, 1990).

The concept of an ultimate reality, whether God or a universal morality, and the search for eternal joy and happiness, have been recurrent themes in such explorations. Thus, has emerged the concept of body, soul, and spirit. In Christian thought, the terms soul is often understood as the inner essence or life force of a person, encompassing a multitude of psychological aspects, including cognitive processes, emotional states, volitional tendencies, and motivational factors. The spirit, in turn, refers to that innermost aspect of one's inner being, associated with morality, conscience, faith, and the capacity for worship and spiritual transformation. The relationship between body, soul, spirit, and God is characterized by dependence, communion, and divine

interaction (Wommack, 2005, pp. 1-3), and Biblical texts have numerous references to soul, spirit, and its relationship with the divine.

In Hindu thought as well, there is a clear distinction between the body (*sharira*) and one's inner self (*Atman*). While the outer body is perishable, having the beginning and an end, the *Atman* is defined by the Bhagavad Gita (2.23) as being that which weapons cannot cut, fire cannot burn, water cannot moisten and air cannot dry. The physical body comprises visible components, such as flesh, bones, fat, skin, nerves, hair, and blood, and undergoes six distinct transformations, including birth, existence, growth, modification, decay, and death. In contrast, the *Atman* is eternal and unchanging, representing the essence of the individual. In the context of Hinduism studies, the terminology spirit and *Atman* are frequently used interchangeably, by practitioners of the Hinduism as well as scholars.

The objective of this paper is to compare these two ideas as exemplified in Anne Stevenson's *The Spirit Is Too Blunt an Instrument* (1969) and Adi Shankaracharya's *Atmabodha* (8th century CE) respectively. Through an analysis of the chosen literary pieces, the essay aims to discern the commonalities and divergences between the concepts of spirit and *Atman*. The underlying factors that give rise to these similarities and differences will also be explored.

### STEVENSON'S SPIRIT

Anne Stevenson (1933-2020) was an acclaimed award-winning American-British poet known for her insightful and thought-provoking poetry published across 16 collections, including various selected volumes and two versions of collected poems (1996, 2005). Throughout her career, Stevenson received numerous accolades and awards, including the Northern Rock Foundation Writer's Award and the Cholmondeley Award. Her poetry, characterized by its lyrical quality and keen observation of human experiences, often delves into themes such as love, nature, identity, and the complexities of existence. One of the prevailing motifs in her poetry is the contemplation of the nature of reality, and she frequently utilizes the device of questioning to delve into the complexities and enigmas of existence. Regardless of the subject matter, she displays a sense of curiosity, bewilderment, speculation, and a certain dissatisfaction, at the incongruous and often paradoxical nature of life. She therefore implores her readers to likewise reflect upon the perplexing nature of their own experiences and the underlying essence of the world they inhabit. As Grosholz (2001) notes, for Stevenson, "there is no single right answer to the question of reality, but there are plenty of wrong answers, answers that shame and diminish the contradictory richness of all that we encounter."

*The Spirit Is Too Blunt an Instrument*, a poem featured in her 1969 collection *Reversals*, presents the perspective of a mother observing the miracle of new life primarily from an empirical standpoint. Stevenson's contemplation encompasses the duality of the body and spirit, recognizing that the process of childbirth is rooted in the physical realm, thereby implying that the spirit, lacks the capability to orchestrate such a complex and beautiful creation. She wonders at the intricate complexities of a newborn baby's body, marveling at the astounding precision that seems to be the result of indifferent biological processes, and highlights the stark contrast between the flawless yet emotionless scientific construction and the tumultuous and unpredictable nature of human passions. Stevenson recognizes two opposing ideas at play. On the one end is the human body, supposed to gross and less refined than the spirit, yet it is a marvel of creation and beauty. At the other end is the spirit, the most refined and perfect aspect of a human being, yet something that is constantly at the mercy of contradictory emotions and thoughts. By exploring these divergent aspects, she seems to suggest that an amalgamation of precise biology and the enigmatic workings of the mind together define the essence of humanity.

A close examination of the poem reveals several significant aspects regarding the nature of the spirit. Stevenson presents the spirit as an inadequate and incapable force; it is "too blunt an instrument" in comparison

to the intricate and precise workings of the human body. The spirit is unskillful, she says, lacking the precision necessary to create something as complex as a baby. The body, on the other hand, is characterized as a marvel of intricate and precise construction. Stevenson emphasizes the complexities of the body, highlighting its precise functionality and the seemingly complex nature of its physical components. She describes the "tiny blind bones," "manipulating tendons," "resilient fine meshings of ganglia and vertebrae," and the "chain of the difficult spine." The body is a finely crafted instrument, skillfully designed and functioning with remarkable accuracy.

Stevenson contrasts the delicate and intricate nature of the body's physical elements with the limitations of human passions and sentiments associated with the spirit. The spirit is portrayed as inadequate and unable to match the body's ignorant precision and flawless connections. She challenges the readers to "name any passion or sentiment possessed of the simplest accuracy" to be able to craft a human body with such precision, perfection, and efficiency. The spirit, bogged down as it is under the weight of unpredictable emotions like love and despair and oscillating thought patterns, is therefore inferior to the intricate and predictable working of the body. Stevenson suggests that while the spirit may be responsible for emotions and sentiments like love, despair, and anxiety, it lacks the precision and accuracy that the body possesses. The body, with its intricate and precise workings, is presented as a marvel of creation, surpassing the capabilities of the spirit (Stevenson, 1996, p. 24).

### **SPIRIT IN CHRISTIAN THOUGHT**

In Christian thought, the body-soul-spirit complex reflects the interplay between the physical body, the soul, and the spirit in human beings. The body, representing the physical form and material existence of an individual, is the tangible aspect that interacts with the external world through the senses and carries out physical functions. Soul and spirit are different concepts in the Bible, yet people often use the terms interchangeably. However, such usage is not correct. The soul is the intermediary between the body and the spirit, encompassing the mind, emotions, and will of an individual. The term "personality" is commonly used to refer to an individual's soul. The spirit is the innermost aspect of a person, inaccessible by conventional means, and is often seen as the divine spark or connection to the higher realm. It is the part of an individual that seeks spiritual truth, communion with God, and a deeper understanding of the spiritual dimension of existence (Wommack, 2005, pp. 1-3).

The human spirit is associated with the capacity for self-awareness and thought, and it is through the spirit that individuals can reflect, reason, and make choices. It allows individuals to have a personal relationship with their Creator, to seek God, worship Him, and experience spiritual transformation. Romans (5:5) declares that "God's love" has been poured out into human hearts through the Holy Spirit. It is through the spirit that individuals can align themselves with God's will and live according to His principles. Romans (8:26) unequivocally declares that it is the Spirit helps man in their weakness, and that even if one may not know what they ought to pray for, but "the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans." Riggleman (2021) suggests that the spirit is activated when Jesus Christ is accepted as the savior and that it is the spirit that "separates believers from unbelievers." This awakening of the spirit is facilitated by the Holy Spirit, which is considered the breath of God (1 Peter 3:18, Ephesians 2:4-5, Colossians 2:13). The interaction between individuals and God is primarily facilitated through their spirits, and believers engage in prayer and communicate with God in their spirits, establishing a personal connection and relationship with Him. In this sense, the spirit is neither immortal nor eternal, since it "comes alive" when one accepts Jesus Christ as their Lord. The question of immortality and the domain of existence of the spirit are two of the key differences between soul and the Indian idea of *Atman* which we will discuss next.

## ADI SHANKARACHARYA'S ATMABODHA

Adi Shankaracharya is a prominent figure in the intellectual and spiritual history of India, who lived during the 8th century, or much earlier, according to some traditional accounts. He is revered by Hindus for his contributions to the Advaita Vedanta philosophy, a significant school of thought within Hinduism which emphasizes the realization of the Self or *Atman* as the key to liberation. Through his commentaries on important texts such as the principal *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and *Brahma-sutra*, Adi Shankaracharya articulates the fundamental understanding of one eternal and unchanging reality, in contrast to the limited and often misguided human perception of multiplicity and differentiation. As Swami Nikhilananda (1947, p. xi) notes about Adi Shankaracharya, “in him one finds the unusual combination of philosopher and poet, savant and saint, mystic and religious reformer, debater of rare forensic power and passionate lover of God.”

One of his notable works is *Atmabodha*, an introductory text (*prakarana grantha*) to Advaita Vedanta, serving as a comprehensive guide, meticulously elucidating the means to attain self-knowledge (*atma-bodha*). The very name of the text, says Swami Nikhilananda, “suggests its perennial interest and universal value” (p. xxii). Adi Shankaracharya's poetic style, enriched with vivid similes, enhances the clarity and depth of his explanations, making the text accessible and engaging to seekers of knowledge. In *Atmabodha*, Adi Shankaracharya provides a very clear definition of what *Atman* is and what it is not. He likens the Self to a king, “distinct from the body, senses, mind and intellect, all of which constitute the matter (*Prakriti*); and is the witness of their functions” (Swami Chinmayananda, 2004, p. 52). He further adds that, “just as a lamp illumines a jar or a pot, so also the *Ātman* illumines the mind, the sense organs and so on” (p. 75).

In Vedantic thought, individuals are believed to possess three bodies, the gross physical body, the subtle body, and causal body. The outermost layer is the gross physical body (*sthula sharira*), which can be perceived by the senses. Behind it is the subtle body (*sukshma sharira*), which is not perceivable by the senses. This subtle body consists of a complex framework comprising nineteen elements known as *Tattvas*. These include the five *Jnana Indriyas*, which are the faculties of knowledge responsible for perception and cognition, and the five *Karma Indriyas*, which are the faculties behind various physiological functions. Then there are the five *Pranas*, the life forces that animate the body and sustain different bodily functions. Apart from these, the *sukshma sharira* serves as the seat of the *manas* (mind), *chitta* (memory), *buddhi* (intellect) and *ahamkara* (ego). The causal body (*karana sharira*), which lies behind the other bodies, is where various inherent tendencies reside. *Atman*, on the other hand, is *dehendriyamanobuddhiprakritibhyo vilakshanam* or different from all these elements that make up *prakriti* (matter). Not only is it separate, the *Atman* is like a witness watching all but never participating in the proceedings itself. Just as a king watches the drama and dance in the royal court without participating, in the same way the *Atman* is a “witness of the drama of life going on in this body and in the world outside – the microcosmic and the macrocosmic existence” (pp. 52-53). The *Atman*, like space, fills everything within and without, yet always remains changeless and “pure, unattached, stainless and motionless” (p. 92). Unlike the spirit, which is the seat of emotions and thoughts, and a faucet-like structure which allows divinity to percolate down, the *Atman* as a concept is beyond human cognition.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The spirit, as depicted by Stevenson in her poem is blunt, unskilled, and incapable of managing the intricate particulars of the body's construction. On the other hand, she expresses awe and admiration at the body for its meticulous construction and the perfect coordination of its various components. Stevenson seems to challenge the usual notion of the human spirit as being supremely sublime and a seat of perfection capable of wondrous thoughts that drive the progress of society. Her premise is that the human body is the pinnacle of perfection in terms of beauty, symmetry, and precision, while the spirit is far from perfect, being prone to myriad emotions and thoughts, which weigh it down, and hinder the actions of the body. She questions the very idea of blindly

accepting the abstract over the empirical reality visible to the senses. Her poem offers readers a rich canvas of ideas to explore, stimulating intellectual inquiry into the complexities of human existence and the delicate balance between the tangible and intangible aspects of our being. While she may challenge the conceptualization of the spirit as the source of perfection, she does not challenge the body-spirit interrelationship which is at the heart of Christian metaphysics. Nor does she challenge the primacy of the body or empirical reality over the spirit, which is a key aspect of Western civilization.

Hindus often use the term spirituality interchangeably with the word *adhyatma-vidya*, or knowledge of the Self. However as is evident, the Western idea of spirit is quite different from the Hindu idea of the *Atman* (Self). The common themes across both these traditions is the urge to peer inwards and find answers to some of the burning questions of humanity. But the way such answers are sought is quite different. The Christian idea of salvation, by accepting Jesus Christ as the savior of humanity, is not the same as the Hindu idea of liberation or *moksha* which entails the cessation of sorrow by realizing the infinite joy of the Self. In the former, the human spirit becomes a conduit to receive the blessings of Jesus Christ, while in the latter one relies on knowledge and purificatory practices to know the true nature of oneself which is *Atman* or the supreme Self.

One must approach the translation of technical philosophical terms across languages and cultures with caution and sensitivity. As Malhotra (2013, p. 221) notes, the true essence of a philosophical term is deeply rooted in its cultural context, and has specific geographical and historical connotations. The experiences of diverse cultures are not always easily interchangeable, and therefore accurate preservation of precise linguistic categories is essential to maintain the richness and diversity of cultural experiences. When one translates *Atman* as spirit and the knowledge of the Self as spirituality, there is a loss of many important dimensions like eternity, transcendence beyond space and time, and the all-pervasive nature of the Self in Hindu conception. Conversely, when referring to the Biblical idea of spirit as *Atman*, there is possibility that one may attribute characteristics that are contrary to the basic tenets of Christianity. The *Atman* is “attributeless, actionless, eternal, formless, without any desire, thought or modification, ever liberated and ever pure” (Swami Chinmayananda, 2004, p. 90). The spirit on the other hand as understood in the Biblical tradition is that innermost part of one’s being that establishes a connection with the divine, encompassing matters such as faith, trust, and worship. Unlike *Atman*, it is not perceived as eternal or transcendent beyond the realms of space, time, and causation, and is very much a part of the human world, activated when one accepts Jesus as their savior and Lord. It is important, therefore, to approach these translations with sensitivity and precision, aiming to ensure an accurate representation of the original concepts and fostering a deeper understanding of diverse cultural perspectives.

Anne Stevenson and Adi Shankaracharya, exemplifying distinct cultures, have each embarked on profound explorations of the fundamental questions pertaining to human existence from the vantage points of their respective traditions. They have, in their own ways, tried to explain the deepest questions of reality, by exploring the relationship between the gross body and the inner world, using the concept of spirit and *Atman* respectively. They continue a long tradition of philosophers and knowledge-seekers who have grappled with the intricate complexities and enigmatic nature of the body-inner being relationship, explored different ways to comprehend the essence of reality, and attempted to unravel the paths towards liberation and salvation. The means and methods might be different, yet, through it all, these thinkers have greatly enriched our understanding of the interplay between the physical body and the inner being.

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