

The Limited Capacity of Empirical Knowledge

Many have questioned – does spirituality differ from science? The initial perception is that spirituality and science are poles apart. The field of spirituality is centred on a non-corporal (non-bodily) substance, the soul; while the field of science is confined on a corporal (bodily) substance, matter. While science uses powerful instruments and apparatuses to explore the physical order of existence, the non-physical order of existence (soul) is beyond the range of such tools. However, in the field of science itself, many well-known scientists are of the opinion that there is scope for the comparison between science and spirituality (and more broadly philosophy).

The human mind has always been very inquisitive. We ask ourselves – Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? How has this universe come to formation? Who governs this universe? Where are the laws of the universe born from? Such questions have deeply agitated the human mind and have led to the emergence of philosophy and science. Some enlightened people have found the answers but others have not. It seems that the ‘truth’ can only be experienced and not communicated.

But what is the truth? Is what we see the truth? Is the truth all about empirical, realistic and objective evidence? What we see is the relative truth, which is temporary and transient. Therefore, the visible world cannot be wholly accurate and reliable for answering our profound questions. The true answers include the invisible world, the understanding of which needs a deeper vision and perception.

There are two methods of enquiry into the truth - the spiritual and the scientific. The spiritual methods entail identification of the inner self, while the scientific methods study the world theoretically and experimentally. The spiritual enquiry is largely conceptual and qualitative, whereas the scientific enquiry is experimental, quantitative, and application oriented. The spiritual enquiry offers direct absolute knowledge, and the scientific approach provides relative knowledge that may change on further investigations. Both methods of enquiry have their merits and demerits, and one cannot replace the other. It would be wise to integrate the two, and explore reality to the best of our ability and understanding.

So let us ask ourselves again - what is the truth, what is reality? We commonly believe that the things we perceive through our senses (sight, smell, taste, hear or touch) or with the help of scientific instruments are reality. All such substances (*dravya*) in our universe are different modes or states of substances; either in solid, liquid or gas state, and consisting of varying elements, molecules or compounds. There are an infinite number of different substances in our universe.

The universe consists of six types of substances or realities (*dravya*). All physical things we know, from an atom or its sub-particles to a planet or its star, are modes of only one type of substance – matter and energy (*pudgala*). The complete list of six types of substances or realities is below:

1. Matter and Energy (*Pudgalastikaya* or *Pudgala*)
2. Soul (*Jivastikaya* or *Jiva*)
3. An Agent for Motion (*Dharmastikaya* or *Dharama*)
4. An Agent for Rest (*Adharmastikaya* or *Adharma*)
5. Space (*Akasastikaya* or *Akasa*)
6. Time (*Kala*)

We can feel or understand the existence of some of these six types of substances, but all of them are confirmed by omniscient beings that 'see' the substances in their absolute and pure state. Our perception is limited and relative due to the frame of reference provided by our physical mind, and our beliefs. An omniscient sees the realities, physical and non-physical, by his inner self without the help of senses and is therefore able to perceive the realities in their absolute form. Their existence is even logically proven.

Each substance (*dravya*) has an infinite number of attributes or qualities (*guna*). However, each type of substance has the same set of attributes or qualities. For example, if you take matter and energy (*pudgala*) as the type of substance, we know that all matter and energy has colour, odour, taste, touch etc. These are all the attributes of matter and energy. If you study an apple, it possesses this set of attributes. If you take a ball, it also has the same set of attributes. Similarly, if you take the soul (*jiva*) as the type of substance, it has energy, perception, knowledge and bliss (amongst others) as its set of attributes. Different souls would have different levels of these attributes.

There are also attributes or qualities (*guna*) that are present in all six types of substances. For example, objectivity (*pramayetva*) is an attribute that allows the substance to be known and become the subject of knowledge. Similarly, eternal existence (*astitva*) is another common attribute. A third common attribute is spatial existence (*pradesatva*), meaning that the substance extends into space, and hence has a shape.

The term reality or substance (*dravya*) is used in a specific sense in Jain philosophy. It refers to the fundamental substances that constitute the Jain universe (*loka*). *Loka* is a technical term of Jain philosophy meaning the entire space in which all the six types of substances or realities exist. The Jain universe is much bigger than the universe known to science. A substance is capable of eternal existence through an infinite number of creation and termination. It experiences transformation or modification of its state (*pariyay*). For example, our apple can change its taste, colour or feel at all times. In the same way, every soul would have the same set of attributes, but in continuously varying levels (of energy, knowledge, etc.).

The attribute of permanence implies that a substance can neither be created nor destroyed; it can only change its form. All objects are transitory permanent i.e. they are transient in respect of states and attributes and permanent in respect of their substance type. No object can be purely transitory or purely permanent.

We have learnt about *jiva* as being one of the six types of substances in the *loka*. We need to know more about *jiva* to understand its functioning. The *jiva* naturally exists in impure form. The impurity in *jiva* is due to karma attached to it. *Jiva* without karma, which are *pudgala*, is not found naturally. Thus the *jiva*, which was described as non-corporal, is in fact corporal as found in nature. In practice, only the impure corporal form of *jiva* is capable of performing any physical action. The non-corporal form of *jiva* cannot do anything physical. This is an important concept and must be clearly understood.

In order that we maintain clarity of description we define the soul as the corporal form of *jiva* having a *karma* body. The soul is the doer and enjoyer of sensual acts of pleasure and pain through physical activities of body, speech and mind. The soul interacts with the external world through *karma*. The *karma* determines the degree of impurity of the soul. The consciousness of *jiva* with less karma is more explicit, and with more karma is less explicit.

The *atma* is the sentient part of the soul that is, it is the *jiva* substance in the impure state or it is the non-corporal part of the corporal soul. Being non-corporal, *atma* by itself is incapable of performing physical acts of body, speech and mind, which are characteristic of life. When the soul performs physical acts, the *atma* possessing consciousness undergoes modification and depending on the level of consciousness experiences knowledge, bliss and vitality. The pure *atma* having full manifestation of consciousness enjoys unlimited knowledge, bliss and vitality. This is what we refer to as enlightenment or freedom of the soul (*moksha*).

We have established above that knowledge (*gnan*) is an attribute of the soul. In fact, the soul is the only type of substance that possesses knowledge as an attribute; no other type of substance has knowledge as an attribute. This means that the soul is aware of other substances – it is the only ‘knower of things’. When the *jiva* achieves *moksha*, it possesses absolute knowledge (*kewal gnan*) – it has mastered knowledge of all substances, all their attributes, and all variations of these attributes.

How then can the physical, observable universe tell us the whole story? How then can scientific apparatuses reveal and measure the complete truth? Science is based on *kumati gnan* – where we can only know of things through reading, hearing and observing. Science remains a powerful ingredient in our quest for the ‘truth’; however, it is limited by its indifference to metaphysics, philosophy and non-science as a whole. Does this present a case for spirituality to contribute its discoveries and conclusions of reality? Does the knowledge in Jain manuscripts about the *loka* and cosmology provide higher dimensions for our search for the eternal truth?

“Jain Metaphysics and Science: A Comparison” – by Dr N L Kachhara is a paper that elaborates well on the topic of this article. This can be accessed at <http://www.jainworld.com/science/Metaphysics/Metaphysics/Metaphysics.pdf>.