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Charvaka (Lokayata): Ancient India’s Materialist Philosophy

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Charvaka (Lokayata): Ancient India’s Materialist Philosophy

Charvaka, also called Lokayata, was an ancient Indian school that trusted only what the senses can perceive. It denied the soul, rebirth, karma and the value of rituals. Its own books are lost, so we know it mainly through critics and later summaries.

1 Which source of knowledge did the Charvakas accept?

The Charvakas accepted one source of knowledge only. It was pratyaksha, or direct perception through the senses. A pramana is a valid way of knowing something. Most Indian schools accepted several pramanas. The Charvakas accepted just one.



An 11th-century Sanskrit philosophical manuscript. Photo by Ms Sarah Welch via Wikimedia Commons, CC0.

What did they reject, and why?

- **Inference (anumana)** means reaching an unseen fact from a seen sign. Seeing smoke and concluding fire is an example.
- **Testimony (shabda)** means trusting a reliable word or a sacred text, such as the Vedas.

Their argument against inference was simple. Inference needs vyapti, a rule that the sign and the thing signed always go together. Smoke always means fire is one such rule.

The Charvakas asked how anyone can know it for all cases, past, present and future. Perception cannot check every case. So the rule stays doubtful, and so does the inference.

Think it through. Why did rejecting inference also block belief in a soul?

A soul cannot be seen or touched. Only inference or scripture could prove it. The Charvakas accepted neither. So they said there was no proof of a soul.

What is the memory hook?

Think “seeing is believing”. If the senses cannot show it, the Charvakas did not accept it.

> **Quick check 1.** The Charvakas accepted perception as their only valid source of knowledge. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: iep.utm.edu; gutenberg.org

2 What is the world made of, and where does the mind come from?

The Charvakas said everything is made of four elements. These are earth, water, fire and air. The school’s verse names these four and no others. It adds that intelligence is produced from these four elements alone.

How can matter produce a mind?

The Charvakas gave a kitchen example. Fermenting agents, such as kinva, are mixed together. Each one alone is not intoxicating. Together they produce the power to intoxicate. In the same way, the four elements combine in a body and produce consciousness.

What did they say about the soul?

- The body and the soul are the same thing.
- A person says “I am fat” or “I am thin”. Fatness belongs to the body. So the “I” in the sentence is the body.
- When the body dies, consciousness ends with it.
- A phrase like “my body” is only a manner of speaking, like “the head of Rahu”.

The Charvakas also gave no role to a creator god. The IEP says the school explained the world through svabhava, or nature. It means things behave as their own nature makes them. No divine plan is needed.

Think it through. If mind comes from elements, what happens when the body is cremated?

The elements go back to the earth, water, fire and air. The mind has nothing left to stand on. So there is no rebirth.

What is the memory hook?

Think “four elements plus a mixture”. Put the parts together and the new power appears, like the intoxicating drink.

> **Quick check 2.** The Charvakas said space is a fifth element that produces the mind. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: gutenberg.org; iep.utm.edu

3 What did the Charvakas say about rituals, heaven and the good life?

They attacked the rituals of the Vedic priests. A famous verse says the Agnihotra, the three Vedas, the ascetic's three staves and ash smeared on the body are only a livelihood. The verse says they serve people who lack manliness and sense. The verse names Brihaspati, the school's traditional teacher.

What did they say about heaven, hell and the afterlife?

- There is no heaven, no hell and no soul in another world.
- The only "hell" is pain that comes from ordinary causes, such as thorns.
- The only "liberation" is the end of the body.
- They also rejected karma and niyati, the idea of fixed fate. The IEP says both come from a belief that existence has a purpose.

A sharp example comes from the funeral rites. If offerings in the shraddha feed the dead, they argued, then food for people on the housetop could be given down below. Nobody believes that works. So the rite is useless.

What was the goal of life?

The goal was pleasure. The IEP says the good is tied to pleasure. The only duty is to increase one's own pleasure.

The Charvakas knew that pleasure comes mixed with pain. They said a wise person takes the pleasure and avoids the pain. A fish-eater, they said, takes the fish and leaves the scales and bones. One verse says: while life remains, live happily, even on borrowed ghee.

Think it through. Why did priests and critics dislike this school?

It said rituals earn nothing and priests live off them. That challenged the priests' income and authority. It also removed fear of the afterlife, which gave rituals their power.

What is the memory hook?

Think "enjoy now, ritual is a job". No next world means pleasure here, and ritual is only a living.

> **Quick check 3.** The Charvakas taught that karma decides a person's next birth. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: gutenberg.org; iep.utm.edu

4 How do we know about a school whose books are lost?

The Charvakas left no surviving books. The IEP says the Brihaspati Sutra, their classic text, has perished. So we learn of the school mostly from opponents. Opponents were Hindu, Buddhist and Jain writers who quoted the Charvakas to argue against them.

Which sources tell us about it?

- **Sarvadarsanasangraha** is a summary of the philosophical systems by Madhava. Its first chapter sets out the Charvaka view in the school's own verses. It is the best-known source.
- **Jayarashi Bhatta** wrote the Tattvopaplavasimha. The SEP dates him between 800 and 840 CE. It calls him a "qualified sceptic" tied to the Charvaka school. Scholars are divided on whether he was a Charvaka or a radical doubter.

- **Kautilya's Arthashastra** lists Lokayata with Samkhya and Yoga under Anvikshaki. Anvikshaki is the science of reasoning.

What do the names mean?

Lokayata means "found among the people", or "philosophy of the people". Charvaka may come from the name of a founder. The IEP says one account names Charvaka and Ajita Kesakambalin as the founders. Some hold that Brihaspati was the original founder. The founder question is not settled.

What were the Dhurtta and Sushikshita schools?

Dasgupta mentions two Charvaka schools in later writing, called Dhurtta and Sushikshita. He says the date of both cannot be found.

One reading is that the Dhurtta rejected the soul fully. The other reading is that the Sushikshita accepted a soul that dies with the body. Treat this as a scholar's reading, not a settled fact.

Think it through. Why can a lost school still be studied?

Its opponents quoted its arguments in order to answer them. Madhava also copied the school's verses. So later books keep the ideas even when the original books are gone.

What is the memory hook?

Think "known through its enemies". Critics preserved the Charvaka verses.

> **Quick check 4.** The Brihaspati Sutra, the classic Charvaka text, has survived to this day. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: iep.utm.edu; plato.stanford.edu

Sources: archive.org; wisdomlib.org

5 Who else denied karma or free choice, and how were they different?

Charvaka was not the only doubter of its age. The Buddhist Samannaphala Sutta records other teachers who challenged the idea that deeds bring results. Dasgupta describes two of them.

What did Ajita Kesakambali teach?

Ajita Kesakambali taught that good and bad deeds bring no result. He said there is no other world. At death a person is wholly ended. This is close to the Charvaka view. The IEP names him as a founder of Indian materialism.

What did Makkhali Gosala teach?

Makkhali Gosala led the Ajivikas. He taught niyati, or fate. In his system nothing depends on human effort. Things become pure or impure without any cause, shaped by fate, surroundings and one's own nature. This is determinism, not materialism.

How do the Charvakas differ from the Ajivikas?

- The Charvakas explained things by svabhava, or nature. They rejected niyati, fixed fate.
- The Ajivikas put fate in charge and denied the power of effort.
- Both rejected the Vedic idea that rituals earn rewards.

Think it through. Both schools denied karma. Why are they still different?

The Charvakas said natural causes decide things and pleasure is the aim. The Ajivikas said fate decides everything and effort is useless. Different reasons, different conclusions.

What is the memory hook?

Think “nature versus fate”. Charvaka stands for nature. Ajivika stands for fate.

> **Quick check 5.** The Charvakas believed that fate (niyati) rules everything. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: wisdomlib.org; iep.utm.edu

6 How has this topic been asked in exams?

Which PYQs matter?

Which traps repeat?

- Nyaya and Vaisheshika are orthodox schools. They are not Charvaka schools.
- Charvaka accepts perception alone. Do not add inference or testimony.
- Charvaka rejects karma and niyati. Do not link it to fate.
- The founder is traditionally Brihaspati, but historians do not settle it.
- The Charvaka books are lost. Do not say we read its main text today.

What is the memory hook?

Think “one source, four elements, no next world”. Say the three phrases before an exam.

Practice MCQs

1. Which single source of knowledge (pramana) did Charvaka accept as valid?

A. All three equally

B. Shabda, verbal testimony, alone

C. Pratyaksha, direct perception, alone

D. Anumana, inference, alone

See answer ↓

2. According to the Charvaka verse in the Sarvadarsanasangraha, which elements alone produce intelligence?

A. Fire, air and space only

B. Earth, water and fire only

C. Earth, water, fire and air

D. Earth, water, fire, air and space

See answer ↓

3. Why did the Charvakas reject inference as a source of knowledge?

A. The Vedas had forbidden it

B. A universal rule linking sign and thing cannot be confirmed by perception in every case

C. It was invented by Buddhist logicians

D. It could only be used to prove pleasure

See answer ↓

4. How does a famous verse quoted in the Sarvadarsanasangraha describe the Agnihotra, the three Vedas and ash smeared on the body?

A. As rites that need an inference to be proved

B. As duties that earn rewards in the next world

C. As the surest path to liberation

D. As only a means of livelihood for people without knowledge

See answer ↓

5. What did the Charvakas treat as the goal of human life?

A. Dharma, duty done without reward

B. Enjoyment of pleasure, avoiding pain where possible

C. Union with Brahman

D. Moksha, release from rebirth

See answer ↓

6. Which teacher led the Ajivikas and taught that fate (niyati) decides everything?

A. Jayarashi Bhatta

B. Brihaspati

C. Makkhali Gosala

D. Ajita Kesakambali

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** The answer is pratyaksha, direct perception, alone. The Charvakas rejected both inference and testimony. They said only what the senses show can be trusted. Memory hook: seeing is believing. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** The answer is earth, water, fire and air. The verse names these four and says intelligence comes from them alone. It compares this to the intoxicating power that appears when fermenting agents are mixed. Memory hook: four elements plus a mixture. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** The answer is that the universal rule (vyapti) cannot be confirmed by perception in every case. Smoke means fire is such a rule. Perception cannot check all past and future cases. So the Charvakas called inference doubtful. Memory hook: no rule, no inference. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** The answer is that they are only a means of livelihood. The verse names Brihaspati and says these were made as a living for people lacking sense. The Charvakas saw ritual as a job, not a path to heaven. Memory hook: ritual is a job. ↑ Q4
5. **B.** The answer is enjoyment of pleasure, avoiding pain where possible. With no next world, they said, the only goal is a happy life here. They compared this to eating fish while leaving the scales and bones. Memory hook: enjoy now. ↑ Q5
6. **C.** The answer is Makkhali Gosala. He taught that nothing depends on human effort and that fate shapes all things. The Charvakas differed. They rejected niyati and explained things by nature (svabhava). Memory hook: nature versus fate. ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** They rejected inference and testimony. ↑ 1
2. **False.** it is false. The verse names four elements alone. ↑ 2
3. **False.** it is false. They rejected karma and rebirth. ↑ 3
4. **False.** it is false. The text has perished. ↑ 4
5. **False.** it is false. Fate was the Ajivika view. ↑ 5

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