

# The Theory of Knowledge in Jainism



According to Jainism consciousness or awareness is the essential quality of each individual soul. By itself, a soul does not require any external means to gain knowledge because knowledge is inherent in its essential nature and by that it has omniscience or the all-knowing awareness without the need to depend upon perception or cognition.

Knowledge does not arise because of perception or mental activity. It exists in itself, whether we know or not and whether we perceive things or not. In other words, the world is real, not an illusion.

However, in a state of bondage, such knowledge becomes covered by the impurity of karma and remains inaccessible to the souls. Thereby the souls lose their omniscience temporarily and rely upon limited means and intermediate sources such as the mind and the senses to gain knowledge and make sense of their experiences and existence.

In this condition, beings gain the knowledge of the world sequentially first through perceptions and then through intelligence. Perceptions help them to acquire the generalities of the objects perceived, while intelligence helps to gain specific details of each of them. These methods are not foolproof since they are prone to errors.

In beings this process of knowing happens in five different ways. Of them, the first three are imperfect and prone to error, while the last two are perfect and convey the truth without error. These five means or instruments of knowledge are explained below.

## Means of Knowledge

**1. Mati:** Mati is mind. Mati jnana is the knowledge of the mind, usually gained through your senses, memory, remembrance, cognition, and deductive reasoning. It is something which you know with the help of your mind and its various faculties. From a soul's perspective, this is indirect knowledge derived through the agency of the mind and its faculties (senses).

**2. Sruthi:** When you learn something from other sources, other people or beings, through your observation of signs, symbols or words, we call it sruthignana or the knowledge of sruthi or hearing. This type of knowledge is gained through association (labdhi), attention (bhavana), understanding (upayoga) and naya or varied interpretations of the meaning of things (naya). This is indirect knowledge obtained through description, authority, study, hearing and listening.

**3. Avadhi:** You gain this type of knowledge not through physical means such as the senses or the mind, but through your psychic abilities, or through clairvoyance and intuitive awareness, by overcoming the limitations of time and space. It is beyond the boundaries of your ordinary awareness and faculties and not generally available to everyone. This is direct knowledge.

**4. Mahaparyaya:** This knowledge is gained by reading the minds and thoughts of others. It is also direct knowledge obtained from others through an extrasensory perception such as telepathy or mind reading. Mahaparyaya is facilitated when an individual attains or nears the state of perfection. In that state, his own ego becomes silent and dormant. Thereby he is able to enter into any consciousness at will and experience oneness with it.

**5. Kevala:** It is the highest knowledge gained when you transcend your ordinary self and attain perfection or aloneness (kaivalya). Hence only a Jina or Kevalin has access to it, and through him, others may learn it as shruti. By itself, this knowledge does not require any outward agency for its transmission because it is always there, in the consciousness of the soul which flowers fully in an enlightened Jina, unattached, unlimited and without any constraint of time and space, duality, and objectivity. Since it is transcendental, it cannot be conveyed or expressed adequately to the satisfaction of others. However, it can be obtained omnisciently in a state of perfection, when the soul becomes liberated from the bondage to the cycle of births and deaths.