**Śramana Tradition**

* The śramaņas were organised group of wanderers and ascetics. Some of the known groups are:

1) Paribbājakas (wandering ascetics)

2) Âjivikas (ascetics depending on alms)

3) Jatilas (matted hair ascetics or turban)

4) Acelakas (no-clothes ascetics)

5) Ekasāţakas (wearing only one garment)

6) Kesakambali (ascetics using hair as clothes)

* The word śramaņas means to strive. They strive to overcome defilements by practicing rigorous self-discipline, self-denial, self-indulgence, self-mortification and meditation.
* They go forth from householder life to homelessness. They abandoned all social commitments and become wanderers, surviving in whatever means they could in the forests or by begging.
* They were searching for new paths by which they could attain a better spiritual happiness and peace of mind. Thus, they wandered hither and thither learning from various thinkers. They spend their time developing intellectual thinking, trying out ascetics’ practices, studying nature, teaching and arguing with each other with a view to finding which standpoint is true.
* They held different views on food, clothing and receiving of alms-food and about rules of monastic life. For example, Jains rejected clothing but cover the genitals with a piece of cloth; acelakas were fully naked; buddhist monks were allowed three; ekasātika used only one; ajita wore a hair blanket.

Âjivikas were permitted cold water, raw seeds and prepared food; Niganthas were not allowed all the three; monks were allowed one meal a day.

The Buddha permitted the use of alms-bowls made of clay but ājivikas received alms food in hands.

* Most of the śramaņas believed in transmigration of a soul from a dying body to a newly conceived one. The Buddha rejected the concept of soul.
* Buddha also comes under śramaņas group. It was mentioned that when Buddha was an ascetic, he had undergone training from ascetic teachers – Âlāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta

**Buddhist Critiques of the Sramana Tradition**

The Buddha gave rational critiques on their practices as follows:

**(1) Two Extreme Practices**

1. Beginning from the Dhammacakkapavattana sutta (SN56:11), many discourses criticize self-mortification (attakilamathānuyoga) which is referred to as painful (dukkho), ignoble (anariyo), meaningless (anatthasamhito); and self-indulgence (kāmasukhallikānuyoga) as low, inferior, degradable (hino), vulgar (gāmmo), ordinary, common or worldly.

The Buddha discourages the practice of either extremes, as they neither lead to perfect peace nor enlightenment; the self-mortification weakens one‘s interest or intellect, and self-indulgence retards one’s spiritual progress. He advocates the middle path (majjhimāpatipadā).

1. In the Mahāsihanāda sutta (DN8), the Buddha criticized the practices of self-mortification saying that if his morality, heart and wisdom are not developed and brought to realization, then indeed he is still far from being a samana or a brāhmana.

He further explained to the naked ascetic Kassapa the futility of extreme self-mortification and said that only when a recluse practiced to become accomplished in morality (síla), concentration (samādhi) and knowledge (pańńā); cultivated loving-kindness and dwelt in the emancipation of mind, and emancipation through knowledge that he is called a samana or a brāhmana.

1. Further criticism cited in Cūļadukkhakkhandha sutta (MN14) that self-mortification is tiresome and useless.

Cittasaṃyutta (SN41:9) cites the confession of a naked ascetic who practices severe self-mortification for thirty years did not attain any superhuman distinction in knowledge and vision of the noble one, no dwelling in comfort, but nakedness, the shaven head and the brush for appeared as wasted effort.

**(2) Two Extreme Views**

1. Eternalism (sassatavāda) - the belief of existence (bhavadiţţhi).
2. Annihilation (ucchedavāda) - the belief of non-existence (vibhavadiţţhi).

In the Brahmajāla sutta (DN1) a total of sixty-two views were identified under these two extremes. Out of which fifty-five schools proclaimed the soul theory of eternalist view and seven schools proclaimed that nothing exists after death maintaining an annihilist view.

According to Buddha’s remarks made in the Dhammacakkappavattana sutta, these terms inferior (hino), vulgar (gamma) and worldly (potthujjaniko) were referred to in the practice of self-indulgence that is generally associated with nihilist view but were not referred to when representing the practice of self-mortification that is associated with eternalist view.

This seems to suggest that Buddha was more sympathetic towards eternalist and more critical of the nihilist. This implication seems to be that although eternalist does not lead to the cessation of dukkha, nevertheless, it does not lead to the breakdown of the moral life; whereas, the nihilist indulging in satisfying their sense-pleasure, takes life for granted and do not take moral responsibility for his actions.

**(3) Soul Theory**

1. The sramana were highly interested in speculative philosophy such as eternity or non-eternity of the world, identity and difference of the body and soul, survival after death etc. Buddha challenged the meaningfulness of these problems.
2. In Poţţhapāda sutta (DN9:24) a wanderer Poţţhapāda, in his dialogue with the Buddha, was not convinced that he was totally lacking in a soul. Buddha’s reply to his preconceived notions, beliefs and views is very applicable in today’s context – “it is difficult for one of different views, under different influences, with different pursuits and a different training to under the matter.”
3. In Abyākatasaṃyutta sutta (SN44:10) a wanderer Vacchagotta asked the Buddha “is there a self or not?” The Buddha was careful not to appear to incline towards eternalist view or annhilationist view. Instead he maintained silence implying the ten inexpressible questions which should be set aside, taking into consideration that Vacchagotta was not yet mature to understand the truth regarding the concept of attā / anattā.
4. The Buddha unsatisfied with those views of soul theory which do not lead to freedom (vimutti) from suffering, If there were a permanent soul, stable, eternal and not subject to change, than living a holy life for complete destruction of suffering would have been of no use.

**(4) Extreme Austerities**

1. In the Cūla-assapura sutta (MN40) it is stated that there were samanas who believed in purification through various extreme practices and the Buddha explains “the way proper to the recluse” is not mere outward practice of austerities but the inward purification from defilements and the development of the four Brahmā Viharas.
2. According to Kukkuravatika sutta (MN57), there were two ascetics who imitate the behavior of a dog and an ox that after-life would reborn in the companionship with the respective animals. Buddha reveals to them the futility of their practices and gives them a discourse on kamma and its fruit.
3. As mentioned in the Dhammapada 141 – not wandering naked, nor matted locks, nor filth, nor fasting, nor lying on the ground, nor dust, nor ashes, nor striving squatting on the heels, can purify a mortal who has not overcome doubts; Dhammapada 268 – not by silence does one become a sage.

**(5) Critique of the Âjívikas**

1. In Tevijjavacchagotta sutta (MN71), Buddha said it is impossible for ājívika who holds the view of non action (akiriyavāda) to make an end of suffering after death. However, there was only one ājívika been reborn in heaven after death because he was a kiriyavādin who believed in kamma and upheld the moral efficacy of action and deeds.
2. Both Apaņņaka sutta (MN60) and Sandaka sutta (MN76) give critiques of the akiriyavāda doctrine led by the six heretical teachers:-
3. Ajita maintained that one is annihilated upon the breaking up of the body – a nihilist view (uccheda vāda), thus, a denial of the existence of afterlife and kamma.
4. Pūraņa denied every kammical effect of good (merit) and bad (demerit) actions. Hence, he denies the possibility of morality.
5. Makkhali denied causality (ahetuka vādi), no cause and condition and asserted that everything happened due to fate (niyati vādi), thus a denial of the power and efficacy of human action and effort.

If the above doctrines are the sole shaping factors of our suffering and happiness, then religious life or other kind of human effort or exertion becomes useless due to non-action.

Buddha warned that the firm adoption of any of the above three doctrines entails a chain of unwholesome states generating evil kamma that is strong enough to bring a descent into the lower realms and censured by the wise here and now.

Considering the above doctrines that promote non-action (akiriyavadā), one would neglect right conduct concerning verbal, mental and bodily actions. With wrong conduct (duccarita), one would succumb to wrong views (micchā diţţhi), thought and speech.

Therefore, he does not see the danger of the unwholesome state and the blessing of renunciation in the wholesome state. He may even think why should he exert himself in religious practice or see the importance of wholesome action. Buddha further points out and adopts a methodology in dealing with such doctrine concerning right conduct.

1. In Upali Vāda sutta (MN56), Buddha criticized Nigantha’s teaching on the importance of bodily action (kāya danda). Buddha emphasized that mental action (mano kamma) is the most forceful of the three – body, verbal and mental action. Buddha argued that mere bodily action without intention or volition will not produce result.
2. Devadaha sutta (MN101) is a discourse given by the Buddha to refute the wrong views of Nigantha who believed that whatever a person experienced in this life was caused by former action. They practiced austerity as a penance to put an end to the result of former action.

The Buddha experienced the fruitlessness of the wrong view – whenever they practiced with strenuous effort, they experienced strong painful feelings, and when they did not practice with effort they did not feel those pains. Obviously, this is due to the present effort and not the previous kamma.

Buddha further mentioned that nobody could force kamma to bear fruit at his wish by the practice of severe austerities of self-torture.