ABSTRACT
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The theory of ‘self’ or ‘soul’ in literature, and primarily in religious and philosophical writing, in both the Orient and the West has been in the world for thousands of years. The underpinning concept in this research is not to prove whether a soul exists or not simply because philosophers from the Buddha’s era until the present have argued that it is a difficult argument on both sides. The objective of this thesis is simply to examine and contrast the eternalistic philosophies of Classical Hinduism, such as Vedic Hinduism and Vedānta, with the Buddhist concept of non-self or anattā. This research aims to find and resolve the controversy between the animistic philosophies of India with the concept of non-self (anattā) in Buddhism.

In Asia the animistic belief in a soul predates Christianity by several thousand years and, in South East Asia, has even permeated Buddhism. In India, the first documented reference to the soul or self was in the Vedas, although it is a bit obscured. The most commonly held belief was that ‘self’ was identical with ‘breath.’ (prāna). From the earliest examples recorded in Indian philosophy, the most universal definition for ‘self’ was ‘breath’ — the principle of vitality. Obviously, the foremost concept was that the vitality, the animating principle in the life, was most important. The compilers of the Rgveda believed that the self or soul was synonymous with vitality. But the self as breath lacks immortality or permanence because it is fleeting by nature. It is drawn into the lungs from oxygen in the air, or inhaled; and then released from the lungs and through the nose or mouth, or exhaled. It is continually coming and going.
Supporting this concept is the belief that ‘ätman’ in Sanskrit literatures meant ‘breath.’ But the analysis of ‘breath’ itself reveals a temporary and unintelligent force. We know even today that the breath is inhaled and exhaled and yields needed oxygen to brain and body; but it does not abide permanently in the brain and the body. It likewise does not contain anything really intelligent. After the Vedic arguments of the self, the Vedānta literature began to seek deeper and more philosophic concepts of the self. Definitions of self or soul, though still argued as immortal, eternal or blissful, varied from one Upaniṣad to another and some contradicted themselves or each other. The other philosophies have mostly agreed with the eternalistic idea of the Vedic literature.

This single, unitary divinity had several aspects and names in the Upaniṣads, one of the most important of which is ātman, a word that originally meant ‘breath’ or ‘soul’ or ‘vital principle’. As a cosmological principle or deity, ātman seems to be something like ‘universal soul’ or ‘universal spirit.’ In the Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, ātman is explicitly called a Person or Puruṣa that created the universe and sentient beings. This would explain the diversity of nature: most animate objects, such as humans and animals, are divided into male and female. It could be that the Ancients wanted to explain this division. In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, this single god is called Brahma, and is ‘the One without a second’; this Brahma is not only the principle and creator of all there is, but is also fully present within each individual.

The Vedas, Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyas and Upaniṣads believed that the ‘soul’ persists even after the death. In other words they believed in the concept of reincarnation and transmigration of the ‘soul’. To be precise, they believed that soul was a moving entity separate from mind or body and would reinstate itself in a new body at each birth according to the consciousness. But how can it persist in its last form when the body and mind of the new being has influence on it. For instant, how can a human soul persist as human when the mind and body around it is animal, such as goat or elephant?
Soul has also been equated with the principle of intelligence, or *cetanā*. Beside this, the Vedic scholars believed that the *ātman* was the doer of actions and receiver of fruits. This is in variance with the Cārvākists.

The concept of *cetanā* in Sanskrit literatures bears resemblance to the following definition of man’s highest self – *Ātman* means spiritual knowledge and represents the pinnacle of human awareness. *Ātman* has therefore come to mean the divinity of the human being. But this lofty idea is in contrast with breath, which is void of knowledge. As to whether the soul or self is mind, various authors have contested the issue.

Buddhism emphasizes that the so-called ‘I’ or the sentient being (*sattā*) is only mind and matter (*nāma-rūpa*); the ‘soul’ or ‘self’ does not exist. From this hypothesis, the concept of *anattā* was conceived. The Buddha identified five aggregates that comprise the sentient being: the body (*rūpa*) is the first, and the other four are the aggregates of mind (*nāma*). These are sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), conception or mental formation (*sañkhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāna*). Furthermore, the mind and body alternately influence each other.

So, in contrast with the above-mentioned theory of transmigration, though the consciousness of the last life may have entered the body and mind of the new one, the body and mind would exert some influence and the result depends upon the form that life has assumed.

Furthermore, the Buddha warned against holding the opinion that any one of these five aggregates was a soul or a self. In fact, under *vipassana* meditation, one learns that the body has no life except via the consciousness of the mind. The Buddha revealed that the changing conditions of mind and body led to sufferings of various types and should be released. One should not believe either in their permanence or in their being a self.

What is normally thought of as ‘I’ or the ‘Self’ is in fact an agglomeration of constantly changing physical and mental constituents (*khandhas*), which give
rise to unhappiness if clung to as though this temporary assemblage formed some kind of immutable and enduring object.

In addition, the gods or deified objects speaking in the scriptures spoke from a context of mind–body. We have mentioned two possible explanations. The former is that as the writers of the Vedas perceived life in terms of the mind-body relationship, they drew upon this knowledge to invent the gods. The latter is that, in accordance with Buddhism,

Man evolves into a deity or god through proper mental control and development. This is still a concept even today; but it is still temporary.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter I is the general introduction to this thesis and discusses the development of the concept of self, as well as the Buddha’s counter argument that self is non–existent. The Introduction includes a complete description of the other chapters and a clear objective of our research, our methodology and general remarks. We begin by comparing the western model with the oriental concept and proceed to address the concept from the ancient Indian philosophical definitions. We start with the Vedic concept and proceed through the Vedānta literature and its many composers such as Yajñavalkya. Having discussed the Classical Brahmanical ideas, we continue to the Buddhist concept of anattā (non-self).

Chapter II has been conceived as a full, in–depth study of the source of the Vedas and the other Vedic literatures, which includes the Āranyakas or Forest Texts, the Brähmanas and finally the Upaniṣads. In this chapter, we have mentioned the Vedas first, beginning with the Rgveda. The Classical literature offers a very sketchy and abstract concept of the ‘self’ or ‘I’. In addition, all the references to ‘I’ in this literature were little more than a personal reflexive reference as commonly used in all periods of history and any metaphysical content
is implied. The Vedic literature did not begin to discuss the identity of ātman or ‘I’; instead, it was concerned with the identity of deities ranging from its own pantheon to even the sense organs. In each case the ‘I’ used here, whether Indra, Vāk, Agni or the sense organs, etc. was a personal reference attesting to some power or authority. The tone is one similar to kings and presidents in this age or the recent past.

With the end of the Vedas, or more exactly the Vedāṇta, scholars and priests ventured into the forests and began to ponder on the existence/non-existence of the ‘self.’ Some likened the ‘self’ or ‘I’ to being the force or object behind the mind. Thus, there is the over-all concept that the body is drawn in a direction by one or all of its senses and the ātman is compared to the owner of a chariot, the body is the chariot, the intellect is the driver, the horses are the senses and the mind is the rein by which the intellect controls the senses as mentioned in Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad.

This Upaniṣad has a more philosophical bent to it, as most of the passages related to philosophy. However the term ‘I’ in many passages remains vague in reference and personal in form. The spiritual inclination of this text is more visible from the style of speech in the following passages. It is very sermon-like and abstract in content, as opposed to the mundane language and events.

Chapter II concludes with the Vedic or Vedāṇta description of ātman or self as discussed through the literature of other philosophies such as Jainism and Mīmāṁsā, and so on. On the side of non-self, though less directly, there was Cārvākism (Materialism) which emphasised the body as the only reality. The Cārvākists believed that death, usually a cremation, ended the matter and the next birth had no relation with the last.

Chapter III emphasizes the Buddhist concept of anattā (non-self). Just as the Buddha warned against the belief that body was a self, so he warned that mind was not self; nor was any organ of senses. Chapter III has expressed the
counterpoint in terms of assessing anattā through the other concepts of his teaching: anicca, or impermanence, and dukkha, or unhappiness. The Buddha could be perceived as empirical, because he based his knowledge not on abstract, improbable data but on his personal observations. As to the existence or non-existence of self, the Buddha mentioned it as a heretical concept. The use of ‘I’, therefore, in his teachings was merely referential, first person as is customary in every age when one is speaking to others.

The analogy of body and chariot in Buddhism has taken a different viewpoint. In his empirical view, the Buddha and a few enlightened scholars who followed him as Nāgasena perceived of the body as chariot and mind as driver but they argued that so long as both were assembled and functioning, then satta (sentient being) and chariot existed. When certain things we find combined, we speak of ‘chariot’ or ‘car’. Similarly when all five aggregates combined, we use the designation ‘man’ or ‘sentient being’. The Buddha analysed that the sentient being had five total aggregations: body (rūpa) plus four additional aggregations for mind (nāma). Body includes sense organs such as eyes, ears, tongue and limbs, etc. The nāmakkhandha (mental aggregates) are sensation, perception, mental formation (construction or conception in psychological terms) and consciousness. Furthermore, the Buddha classified sentient beings (satta) to include deities, beings suffering past evil actions, beasts etc. So they all are a combination of mind-body.

Chapter IV is the controversy or dispute between the proponents of ‘I’ and the proponents of non-I. We have begun with the pro-Vedic scholars including William Beidler whose work on Vedic and Vedānta literature was a useful source. However, although the arguments for Vedic or animistic views was well-presented, the ‘I’ or ‘aham’ in the scriptures remains only vaguely defined. Lal Mani Joshi analysed that the differences lay in the philosophical contents of each school of thought.
In this chapter, we have attempted to highlight the main similarities and dissimilarities of Pāli and Sanskrit scriptures on the concept of ‘I’ and ‘self.’ One may discern that the similarities remain referential, in that the use of ‘I’ has not exceeded a personal and conventional usage. Though both the ancient seers and the Buddha referred to themselves as ‘I’ conventionally, there has been no real metaphysical connotation. Whatever the inner meaning or connotation of ‘I’ may be in the Vedic literatures, it may be occult in nature hidden. The ideology of the scriptures and their origins are the principle differences.

Chapter V lists the various contributions of modern research on the topic prior to this thesis. This Chapter reviews literature of modern and contemporary scholars on both sides of the controversy; but it is worth mentioning that the preponderant and supportive evidence is on the side of Buddhist scriptures.

Chapter V features modern researchers of various backgrounds — Indian, Asian and western lay scholars, Buddhist monks and others — and we have taken their most significant points. Both the quantity and attitude of the literatures demonstrates a pro-Buddhist inclination. Our research shows that many modern western scholars, including Max Müller, Stcherbatsky, etc. have supported the concepts of impermanence and non-self.

Chapter VI is our conclusion, in which we resolve that the concept of anattā holds truer than any Brahmanical concept of the self. As modern science and medicine converge to support the Buddhist notion that self or soul does not exist, and this more materialistic attitude has taken root in modern human societies, the Buddha’s hypothesis that the core of mortal existence is mind and body and experiences stemming from one or the other, or both, is simpler to defend than an abstract theory on the existence of self which lacks solid evidence.
The general objective of this thesis has been to compare and contrast the Sanskrit and Pāli literatures on the topic of ‘I’ (aham) or the self (ātman/atta) and anattā and not necessarily to slant toward either side; however, with the abstractions of the Vedic thinkers and writers being highly improbable and questionable, and since modern empiricism itself leans towards the Buddha’s hypothesis, the natural conclusion has been that the ‘self’ (atta) cannot exist and Buddhism stands unique in the history of human thought in denying the existence of soul, self or ātman. According to Buddhism, the idea of ‘self’ or ‘I’ is an imaginary false belief, which has no corresponding reality and produces harmful thoughts of ‘me’ and ‘mine’. According to Buddhist analysis, ‘I’ is nothing except the five aggregates of mind and matter that undergo continuous change. This Buddhist analysis of ‘I’ is totally opposite of the analysis of ‘I’ in Vedic literature.

The Buddha’s purpose in explaining anattā is in the first place he takes various aspects of the personality or ‘I’ and proclaims that none of them can be identified with the ātman since they do not have characteristics of the ātman and points out that no existing thing in our consciousness, which is subject to both impermanence (anicca) and suffering (dukkha), cannot contain a ‘self’ as proclaimed by the Vedic literature and the Upaniṣads. The Buddha did not teach anattā as an isolated concept because he believed that it was related to the concept of anicca and dukkha as clearly seen in Samyutta Nikāya XXII, 58 – the Buddha asked his bhikkhus: ‘How do you conceive this, bhikkhus, is materiality permanent or impermanent?’ ‘Impermanent, Lord.’ ‘Is what is impermanent pleasure or pain?’ ‘Pain, Lord.’ ‘Is what is impermanent, painful and subject to change fit to be seen thus “This is mine, this is what I am, this is my self”’? ‘No, Lord.’ (And similarly with the other four aggregates of mind), consequently, bhikkhus, any kind of materiality (feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness) whatever, whether past, future or present arisen, in oneself or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, is all (to be seen thus): “This is not mine,
this is not what I am, this is not my self”. That is how it should be seen with right understanding as it actually is.’

What the Buddha discovered is that the experiences of mind and matter are subject to anicca and dukkha and must be void of anything blissful and permanent. He taught what we call ego, self, soul, personality, I, etc., are merely conventional terms that do not refer to any real and independent entity and he regarded soul speculation as useless and illusory. Due to ignorance and delusion we indulge in the dream that our souls are separate and self-existing entities. Our heart still clings to ‘Self’ and seeks the pleasure of ‘Self’ in heaven. Thus we cannot see the immortality of truth that is called nibbāna in Buddhism. The mere belief in an immortal soul or ātman does not make us immortal unless we know what it is that survives and that we are capable of identifying ourselves with it.

However, as the Buddha concentrated predominantly on dukkha and its cessation, he avoided debating about the existence of a ‘self’ or ‘ātman’ and he was aware that either purporting or denying a self totally was extreme and he preferred to be moderate and words in our vocabulary do not convey the reality of many conditioned and unconditioned things. All average sentient beings are still wandering in the cycle of birth and death (saṁsāra) due to their ignorance of anicca-dukkha-anattā that persists forever whether the Buddha appeared or not in the world and the truth of anicca-dukkha-anattā is not the invention or creation of the Buddha but it is there in saṁsāra and the Buddha enlightened it and revealed it to us. That is why Buddhism stands unique in the history of human thought in denying the existence of soul, self, Creator–God, Brahman or ātman on the basis of the truth of anicca-dukkha-anattā that exists forever in saṁsāra.

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