CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

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Chapter I – Introduction

The theory of ‘self’ or ‘soul’ in literature, and primarily in religious and philosophical writings, in both the Orient and the West has been in the world for thousands of years. Philosophies and religions believing in the existence of a soul are labeled ‘animism’ and ‘eternalism’ whereas their polar opposites include Materialism, Nihilism, Atheism and so on. However, as metaphysical arguments are difficult to conclude, one way or another, the wisest decision has been usually to drop the matter altogether. The underpinning concept in this research is not to prove whether a soul exists or not; it 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.

In the western countries, which inherited Christianity from the Middle East, the concept of the soul in the human being produced scriptures and doctrines for the deliverance of the soul, and the incredible idea that it could be bought and sold like any material object in exchange for power and so on. There were also beings, which had no souls and cast no reflections in water or a mirror. But the definition of soul has remained undefined or at least vague.

In Asia the animistic belief in a soul predates Christianity by several thousand years and, in South East Asia, has even permeated Buddhism. Some countries in the region believe that even inanimate objects contain spirits; but several more awakened scholars, such as Buddhāsa Bhikkhu of Thailand, Walpola Rahula Bhikkhu of Sri Lanka, etc. have made concerted efforts to remove this idea. This animism is reputed to have existed hundreds of years before the arrival of Buddhism. In India, the first documented reference to the soul or self was in the Vedas of the Aryans, although it is a bit obscured. The founders of the Vedic philosophy conceived of ‘self’ as ātman, which is related to the word ‘breath’, and refers to the vital principle. The concept that life depends upon the breath appears to be related. Scientific and other scholars attribute breath with
oxygen, adding that oxygen inhaled into the body is used to empower the brain. This attitude has existed in yogā and meditation, through the practice of controlling breathing. Hence, the teachers who brought meditation, yogā and a belief in the soul into the world agree with the idea that ‘breath’ is the animating principle of life.

Furthermore, scholars such as Yajñavalkya had witnessed the living of persons who lacked one item or another — e.g., small children who acted without conscious thought, blind or deaf adults and so on and concluded that ātman was neither mind nor senses. At that time, there was difference of opinion that soul and mind were identical. Some believed that ātman was the mind, and denoted the conscious, thinking mind as self, whereas others believed that it was not. Still others argued that self was not body, because the body died; henceforth, if self were body, then it was not permanent as it would die.

However, the Upaniṣads, which marked the turning point or reformation of classical thought, brought a new dimension to the idea of ātman. 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. Although many people, even today, argue that ‘great truths are self-contradictory’, nonetheless such notions remain unproved. What stands out more evidently is a general disagreement as to what ‘self’ really is. Primary focus in this chapter is the term ‘aham.’ This is a Sanskrit word meaning ‘I’ and has come to mean something more profound than a simple first person singular pronoun; but the uses of it in the texts are rather cryptical and needed deeper analysis.

On the side of Brahmanical thought is William Beidler, whose analysis of puruṣa as ātman has been included in Chapter V. Beidler has the opinion that the Upaniṣads adequately addressed the issue of the self, defining it as both substance and quality.¹

¹ William Beidler: The Vision of Self in Early Vedānta, p. 259
The other philosophies have mostly agreed with the eternalistic idea of ātman, and they include Mīmāṃsā, Sāṃkhya and even Jainism. On the opposite side of the debate is Čārvākism (Materialism) which believes that the body is the only reality and a soul or self is unfounded, and Buddhism. Čārvākas believed that a person dies and his body is cremated or buried. There is no afterlife. Chapter II of this research will discuss the Vedic notion of self through the scriptural references of ‘aham’ or ‘I’ and, in its concluding section, it will compare the other philosophies as well as the Vedic concept of self.

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 sense. The Buddha further denied that self was permanent or blissful, since his empirical experiences taught that everything around him was temporary and subjected to decay and death at any moment. He warned that such objects could not cause happiness in this world, and urged people to begin the holy life. In this chapter, we shall not only invoke the scripture but we have augmented the teaching with analysis and commentary based upon valid scientific knowledge and experiences.

We have pointed to two main causes for this concept, the former being the variance with the Upaniṣad about a blissful or eternal self; the latter being that the Buddha was essentially empiricist. He could find no evidence of either permanence or bliss in the world and concluded that there was neither. Seeing the temporariness and pain of the world around him, after leaving the palace of his father, and his wife and son, the Buddha understood that neither bliss nor permanence existed in the phenomenal world. In addition to denying or repudiating the ‘blissful, eternal self’ of the Upaniṣads, the Buddha’s references of ‘I’ throughout scripture are, like the Vedic literature and the pre-Upaniṣadic writings, mostly ‘personal and simple.’

As the Upaniṣads became more mystical in tone and content, and began to discuss the nature of self, the Buddha’s difference with them was clear. Chapter III
has expressed the counterpoint in terms of assessing anattā through the other concepts of his teaching, i.e. anicca or impermanence and dukkha or unhappiness. However, the Buddha supposedly expounded on the ‘self’—that is, sattva or, in Pāli, satta. Satta is a compounded article like all temporary objects in the world. The Buddha taught the systematic analysis of the satta, that it was ‘body and mind’ both interrelated and continually changing. He taught further that when the aggregates have disengaged each other and cease to exist, the satta itself ceases to exist. We have assumed the Buddha’s stance in contrast with the two concepts expounded in the Upaniṣads: ‘self’ we have pointed to both historical and philosophical differences between Buddhism and Upaniṣads and have supported them with references from various previous books on the topic.

Chapter IV attempts to bring the two sides together for a study of the controversy between them. As with the previous chapters, we have annotated the text with comments and analysis. Chapter IV, and also Chapter V, begin with the Brahmanic viewpoint and switch to the Buddhist view. Chapter V lists the various contributions of modern research on the topic prior to this thesis.

Chapter IV concludes the controversy by contrasting and comparing the two scriptures with each other. In this chapter, we have attempted to highlight the main similarities and dissimilarities of Pāli and Sanskrit scriptures on the concept of ‘I’. 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 literature, it may be occult in nature hidden. The ideology of the scriptures and their origins are the principle differences. To support this point, we have included data from scholars such as Joshi and Nakamura.

Chapter IV proceeds to discuss the principle differences between the Sanskrit texts of the preceding periods and the Buddhist scriptures through various views, including historical and linguistic approaches. We have been making
throughout the chapter to the content and meaning, as well as the origin, of the Sanskrit texts. The most significant point is that the Brahmanical texts refer to conquests and acquisition of properties. We have learned that the first disciples of the Buddha were former Brahmanas who objected to this attitude and agreed with the Buddha that a Brahmana should live like an ascetic without property or family. Chapter IV takes up the controversy between the two scriptures and compares and contrasts them. As with Chapter V, which follows, we have referred to various noted scholars and previous researchers of both Sanskrit and Pāli scriptures to support his attitude toward the controversy. We cite ideology as primary difference and language as secondary. Historically, the Buddha taught in Sanskrit to his former Brahmana disciples such as Mahākassapa and taught in Pāli to the first Saṅgha, which was composed of lay followers turned bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, who belonged to the Magadhi-speaking masses.

Chapter V 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. Both psychologists and scientists as well as philosophers such as Immanuel Kant have tendered viewpoints reflecting Buddhism on the nature of self. We included the researches of modern psychology on the subject of ‘ego’, which concludes either that ‘ego’ is a product of personal-social conditioning (upbringing, social relations, etc.) or that it altogether does not exist. Philosophers like Kant and Sartre concluded that the ego or self does not exist, as well. Chapter V includes some short essays from scientific views about mind and self too.

Chapter V begins the review of literature with William Beidler’s analysis of Upaniṣadic self as Puruṣa and Ātman and proceeds to discuss the Vedānta concept. Following that, we reviewed various other texts including Cārvākas and Nyāya, etc. The last chapter is our conclusion, in which we resolve that the concept of anattā holds truer than any Brahmanical concept of the self.
Chapter VI concludes the research and reviews the literature and study of the previous chapters. In the Conclusion, we note that, as mind-body summarize all of our existence, the Buddha’s hypothesis that a ‘self’ cannot be proved and therefore may not exist would appear to be the more accurate and acceptable theory in contrast with a largely abstract and more hypothetical Vedic or Upaniṣadic concept.

1.0. Objective of the Study

This research aims to find and resolve the controversy between the animistic philosophies of India with the concept of non-self (anattā) in Buddhism. The word ātman has been used by many philosophers in India and means many different things according to the objectives and nature of each school of thought. Although the question is bound to be asked as whether the Buddha taught to deny the existence of ‘self’ as taught by these schools or simply to deny the false idea of egoism, which is a vital criterion for nirvāṇa, we intend to conclude this research that anattā is the more valid concept.

Throughout this research, we have found various terms used to define ātman or self, as taught from the time of Rgveda and continuing through the Vedānta literature until Jainism. With the possible exception of the Brahma Sūtra, the most numerous definitions of ātman are found within the various Upaniṣads. These terms range from prāṇa (breath) to buddhi (intellect), while nearly simultaneously there has been debate as to the association with body, mind and sense organs. The debate may have issued from the Vedic texts personifying the self and speaking as individual beings.

The texts conducting this debate appear awakened and analytical but, nonetheless, they adhered to a concept of ‘self’. In the beginning of Buddhism, the term attā was used in relation to citta (mind) but even after it has been compared
with satta and puggala (being and person, respectively), the term remains inconclusive. The teaching of anattā, while not the core teaching of Buddhism, is essential to this research for the task of concluding the controversy between the philosophies.

What makes the study of ‘self’ and its negation difficult is that over all it appears to be subjective. The concepts of the Vedic and Vedānta literature seem vague and perhaps poorly conceived. There remains no decisive term for self.

1.1. Materials for Current Study

For the present study, we have used various printed materials including translations of Sanskrit and Buddhist Pāli texts by modern scholars from many places. Western and Indian writers have contributed to the study of Vedic and Vedānta literature. For the Vedic and Vedānta study in this research, we include translations of the Vedas, primarily Ṛgveda, and the subsequent literatures, which developed from the Vedānta such as Āranyakas, Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads. We have supplemented them with printed material from the Internet which feature analysis and comments on the topic; whereas both Buddhist monks and lay scholars have contributed to the study of the three marks of Buddhism. A sampling of such scholars can be found in Chapter V of this thesis.

1.2. Methodology

Our research begins by examining the term ‘aham’ as used in the Ṛgveda and attempts to disclose its metaphysical connotation through the context of the literature. It is worth mentioning that the connotation of aham, and of ātman later, is a subjective interpretation on the part of the scholar at the time of composition.
It is veiled in abstraction and appears as a personal reference as in common speech.

We continue by investigating the Vedānta literature, which is reformative of the Vedas and defined as its extension. The Brāhmaṇas were an extension of the Rgveda, primarily. The Āranyakas began the forest stage of Classical Indian philosophy and marked a period of reformation in which the disciple would sit in the wood with a wandering pandit and the latter would speak of spiritual knowledge. The principle texts of the period were the Upaniṣads. The Upaniṣads are filled with vague and frequently contradictory definitions of self (ātman), which range the gamut from breath to intellect, and then to something less definite.

For the Buddhist studies and anattā, we have referred to texts by various Buddhist and Western researchers. Western scholars include British, German and American writers and they have used their own resources such as scientific analysis and socio-religious backgrounds to conclude the meaning of anattā. Some of them are criticized within the literature for their approach but this scholar has no intention to do so; henceforth, we mention them systematically in the study.

1.3. General Remarks

Due to the similarity between Western and Indian animism and their ideas about ‘self’ or ‘soul’, and to the deeper analysis of the existence of self through modern science, which lean toward Buddhism owing to both Buddhism and science are existential and empirical in nature and deny conjecture, this research has become necessary. Furthermore, the arrival of what is termed the new age has ushered in study and research about the phenomenal world and metaphysics.

To begin, there are a few terms that are frequently used in such research, such as ‘metaphysical’, ‘supernatural’ and ‘psyche’. Whereas ‘metaphysics’ refers to the fundamental study of being and raises questions about the phenomenal
existence, it and ‘supernatural’ have come to imply things which are viewed by common men as ‘strange’, ‘weird’ etc. ‘Supernatural’ means something which is beyond nature. However, new age science declares that everything supernatural is really natural. It has a scientifically provable cause. Therefore, there is an agreement between science and Buddhism that everything has and is dependent upon a cause. The Buddha had explained that in his teaching of ‘patīcca-samuppāda’ or ‘dependent causation.’ A scientific analysis of that can be found in Albert Einstein’s theory of action and reaction: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

As will be explained in Chapter Three of this research, the word ‘psyche’ was originally Greek for ‘soul’ but in modern terms it has come to mean ‘mind.’ Psychology is more a study of the mind than a study of the soul. Modern psychology has probed the mind and its actions but has not found a ‘soul’ in it. Similarly, modern psychology from the time of Sigmund Freud has probed the concept of ego (from Latin ‘I’) and found a complex of conditions such as attitude toward oneself or self-image and the image or ideas of others, and so on. It is defined as ‘the part of the mind that reacts to reality and has a sense of individuality.’ Ego is the cause of interrelation problems. It causes arguments and divisions between persons due to exaggerated views about the self and others. Such manifestations of egoism are arrogance and exaggerated self-worth and a demeaning opinion of others and even nationalism. But a permanent or eternal ‘self’ cannot be proved. However, in modern time, self has been perceived as ‘mind’ (citta, in Pāli).

By looking at the surface of the animistic teachings of Ancient India, one would tend to view these branches of philosophy as ‘metaphysical’ and ‘supernatural.’ The references to ‘I’ in the Vedas and subsequent literature are vague and suggest something hidden from common understanding; for lack of a clear understanding, the founders believed that ‘I’ was ātman or Brahman and assigned it superhuman qualities such as permanence and bliss. In ancient times,
there was a lack of the scope with which modern science has been able to explain the various phenomena in the world; hence, anything beyond man’s understanding was ‘supernatural’. A giant animal or object was viewed as a god, and so forth.

The Sanskrit literature concerning the concept of ātman however is vague and indecisive. According to the Encyclopaedia of Buddhism, Vol. II, ‘the word ātman, of which attā is the Pāli counterpart, is found in the earliest Vedic hymns, though its derivation and meaning are uncertain.’ Following the pantheonic religion, which established Brahman as the eternal cause of the universe, various theories about ātman developed. However, the Upaniṣads bear the most numerous details. The Encyclopaedia of Buddhism remarks later that ‘some doctrines set forth that the self and the universe are eternal (sassatavāda). Some hold that the self and the universe are in some respects eternal and in some, not. Some teachers wriggle like eels and refuse to give a clear answer.’ This appears to be an indication of hesitation and lack of knowledge on the teacher’s part; for, if he truly knows his subject, he should have the answer ready.

The Encyclopaedia continues to mention the Upaniṣads: ‘In the history of Indian philosophic development, it is in the Upaniṣads that we find formulated a doctrine of the self which has remained fundamental in Indian thought and it is this, more than anything else, which needs investigation when dealing with the Buddhist teachings on the self.’

However, it appears that the word attā in Buddhist canon is equally vague and has been used, by the Buddha himself at least, as a reflexive or personal pronoun, such as ‘oneself’, ‘himself’ and so on. To begin with, various scholars of Pāli and Buddhism have translated attā as ‘self’, ‘ego’ ‘soul’ o ‘spirit’, implying that it is the Pāli equivalent to ātman. The Pāli-English Dictionary defines attā as ‘the soul, as hypothesized by the animistic theories.’ It should be observed that the

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2 Encyclopaedia of Buddhism, Vol. II, p. 567
3 Ibid., p. 568
4 Ibid., p. 568
word postulate (here, hypothesize) has been used. ‘To postulate’ means to suppose due to lack of conclusive evidence. So, the definition expresses that the theories suppose that there is a soul, with no real evidence. According to the *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, attā is the ‘spiritual and vital principle of all human action.’ This latter term seems most appropriate in defining ‘spirit’. In his earlier writing, the last Dalai Lama compared ‘spiritual qualities’ with humanitarian action, such as compassion, understanding, friendship and so on. The ‘soul’ seems not a substance but an aspect of human behavior. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines soul as follows: ‘the moral or emotional or intellectual nature of a person or animal.’ As has been observed in Chapter Three, when someone speaks of ‘kindred soul’ he or she refers to ‘a kind and understanding person’ whereas when he says that someone has ‘no soul’ he means that the person he accuses is brutish liked an animal and lacks sympathy and understanding.

In addition, the tendency to find permanence or substantial existence among the changing phenomenal world around us has been with us for a long time. Even today, people see the world in relation to their own lives but fail to see any change, or perhaps refuse to see change, and deny that the world is changing.

Generally, people refer to their thoughts and emotions as their ‘selves’; they form the habit of speech that “I am X” or “I am Y” referring to their sensations, such as hunger, anger etc. In his teachings, the Buddha called this attitude ‘ahaṅkāra’ or ‘mamaṅkāra’ and warned that it was a false idea. By scientific analysis, we come to accept that he was right. In reality, we are not our emotions or sensations, nor are they a self of any kind; they are merely the aggregations of mind. We have done nothing; but a thought arises or an experience occurs which arouses an emotion such as anger, unhappiness or whatever.