

Ontological Dimensions of Buddhism: A Comparatative Study

Normally the philosophical schools of Indian Philosophy are divided into orthodox and heterodox systems. The criterion for this division is acceptance or the denial of the authority of Vedas. Among the schools of Indian Philosophy there is another division with regard to the nature of spiritual substance called soul or atman. From this point of view there are two main currents of Indian Philosophy – one having its source in the atma-doctrine of the Upanisads and the other in the anatma-doctrine of Buddha. These two currents of thought explain reality on two distinct and exclusive patterns. It would be pertinent to mention here that in Philosophy the term substance stands for immutable, eternal and permanent reality which is not subject to change or decay.

Atma-vada

Atma-vada visualizes the concept of the existence of a spiritual substance as reality. The followers of Atma-vada believe in Upanisadic doctrine of soul or the Brahmanical tradition. They believe that the reality consists of soul as the inner, immutable and identical aspect amidst an outer region of impermanence and change, to which it is unrelated or loosely related. This may be termed the Substance-view of reality (atma-vada).

This view acquires radical shape in form of Advaita Vedanta of Shankara. It takes the radical shape in the sense that Advaita Vedanta denies the permanent reality of the apparent/external world which is many and impermanent. The impermanent manifold phenomenon of the world which we experience has been declared as true for practical purposes only and not as a permanent truth or reality.

The Samkhya system is not so radical yet it also holds the view of eternalism. It believes in inner and immutable core spiritual and physical realities.

The Nyaya-Vaisesika systems despite being empirical and pluralist not only accept the atman as the substance but also conceive all other things on the substance-pattern.

The acceptance of soul as a spiritual substance lead to allied concepts of consciousness as the permanent or acquired quality of soul, bondage and liberation of soul, soul changing the body etc.

Anatta or Anityatma (No Self Theory)

The other tradition is represented by the Buddhist denial of substance (atman) and all the allied concepts. For Buddhist change is real, unlike the Upanishadic thinkers who argued that what changes is not real. According to early Buddhism there is no substance, physical or spiritual. There is no inner and immutable core of things which is normally called substance. Buddhism advocates the theory of change which holds that reality is in a state of continuous flux/flow with no permanent entities over and above the constantly changing events in our experience. Buddhist doctrine of universal change and impermanence holds that everything in the world is changing and impermanent. There is nothing that endures and abides eternally.

According to Buddhism Self is nothing but a collection or aggregate of *nama-rupa*. By first *nama* is meant the psychical factors constituting the aggregate; and by the second, *rupa*, the physical body so that the compound signifies the psycho-physical organism and may be taken as roughly equivalent to 'mind and body'. There is another description of this aggregate based upon a closer analysis of the psychical factors constituting it. According to it the self is conceived as five-fold, the five factors or skandhas, as they are called, being *rupa*, *vigyana*, *vedana*, *sangyana* and *sansakara*. Of these the first *rupa* skandha stands for the physical, and rest for the psychical, element in the self. (M. Hiriyanna, p139).

Existence for the Buddhist is momentary, unique (*svalaksana*) and unitary. Consequently, there can be no substantive mind or enduring self. The self is no other than the 'aggregate' or "bundle of ever-changing bodily and mental states, which include the five skandhas and *sanskaras*. When one refers to the self, he means one or more skandhas. Here, identity of the self is reducible to one or more skandhas. It means personhood, for Buddha, is a reducible reality or datum. The existence of substantive, changeless and enduring self is summarily rejected by Buddhist thinkers. Buddhists more or less agree that self as a permanent, changeless entity is non-existent. They all trace the conception of the self to the mind (psychological or mental) and bodily (physical) states (*skandhas*). The Buddha, after categorizing the psycho-physical factors that comprise the personality into five constituents and demonstrating that each one of them is impermanent and sorrowful, asks the

question: “Is it proper to look upon that which is impermanent, sorrowful and changeable as, ‘This is mine; I am this; this is myself’? He receives a negative answer. But this answer will only reveal that according to Buddha it is incorrect to regard the psycho-physical constituents, singly or as a group, as ‘I’, ‘my’, ‘mine’ or ‘my self’.(Upadhyaya. K. N, p.112)

Buddhist refutation of the notion of substantial or metaphysical self is intended to focus and emphasize Buddha’s notion of empirical self which is seen as the binding ego or as said earlier the aggregates of five Skandhas. The denial of the metaphysical self by the Buddhist thinkers is in consonance of the fact that the Buddha had little interest in finding ultimate answers to vexatious metaphysical issues relating to God and soul. Buddha denied self-causation because of his strong conviction that it leads to eternalism. He found that those who advocated self-causation believed in an eternal or unchanging ‘self’ or ‘soul’ and thus ignored the importance or role of the other factors that contributed to the arising of suffering in this life. According to Buddha the believers in the existence of eternal self were so engrossed in belief in a ‘self’ that they failed to emphasize the causal efficiency of factors other than the ‘self’. (David J. Kalupahana, p.154) Buddhism in rejecting the essential reality of personal identity and pre-Buddhist Upanisadic and later Advaita thinkers by equating the personal self with the Supreme Self have sown some possible ways of dealing with some major issue of identity. This also shows that this no-self doctrine or metaphysics of no permanent substance of Buddha had a great impact on Buddhist ethics which is the means or vehicle of *Nirvana*.

Apart from Buddha’s own view where he has rejected self-causation and thus the ontological existence of a substantive “self”, the “self” as “person” and what it stands for are variously conceived by some of the schools of Indian Buddhism. Though all Buddhist, while dealing with the traditional pre-Budhist Upanisadic concept of eternal spiritual substance, accept Buddha’s teaching on the non-existence of soul yet some have realized the necessity of further deliberation and interpretation to account for personal identity and the self-sameness of individuals. There are a variety of interpretations of Buddha’s teaching on the matter of what the person is. Such deliberation with an open mind was felt inevitable also in view of the Buddhist doctrine of karma, rebirth and nirvana. Therefore, the ontological status of the self takes different forms and finds different solutions in the hands of prominent Buddhist thinkers.

(Ramakrishna Rao, p.21) The orthodox Theravada view is that the self is no other than a continuum of collection of aggregates. Vasubandhu has in some sense adapted, modified and amended the “no-self” theory on the basis of his axiological concerns and metaphysical assumptions. Vasubandhu argues that self does not have substantive existence but its existence is substantially established in as much as the conception of the self is dependent on the aggregates, which are substances. In this sense persons have ultimate existence. (K. Ramakrishna Rao said in his presidential address at Interim World Philosophy Congress, New Delhi, 2006)

In this context the thesis of the Pudgalavadins that there is something ultimately real and existing that refers to the person occupies prime importance. The pudgalavadins consider that the self is simply indescribable in that, though its conception is dependent on the aggregates it is neither the same nor different from the aggregates. However self enjoys ultimate existence like fire does as distinguished from fuel.

Pudgalavada is in opposition to the early Buddhism core doctrine *anatman* (Not-Self). The Pudgalavadins, or ‘Personalists’ were dissatisfied with the doctrinal non-acceptance of any kind of substantial self. While other schools saw *sutta* references to the ‘person’ as merely a conventional way of referring to the collection of *skandhas*, they saw the ‘person’ as being just as real as the *skandhas*: a kind of subtle self which, being as organic whole which included them, was neither the same as nor distinct from them. Over time, it was neither identical nor different, neither eternal nor non-eternal. Pudgalavada faces strong opposition from other Buddhist schools. The followers of Pudgalavada were even attributed to as non-Buddhist.

Though criticized by all other Buddhist schools, the pudgalavadins were quite successful, and in the seventh century AD, under the patronage of the emperor Harsa, a quarter of Indian monks belonged to their school. Other than in critiques by their opponents, however, their views have only survived in the Chinese translations of three short texts and the *Sammitiya-nikaya-sastra*, a treatise of one of their offshoots. According to Paul William “the best known surviving Pudgalavada text is only in Chinese translation, but has been given the Sanskrit title of *Sammitiyanikaya Sastra*. There is also extant in Chinese

another Pudgalavadin work given the title of *Tridharmaka Sastra*. (William, p.124)

Historically speaking, even in the time of King Kalasoka (395-367B.C) there were respected Buddhist teachers like Sthavira Vatsa who maintained and propagated the Atmaka (the self) theory, which was sought to be suppressed by some Buddhist teachers. Yet by the time of King Nanda, Kalasoka's grandson, there developed a recognized Buddhist school – Vatsiputriya, later known as Sammitiya also – which accepted this theory. It is possible this school existed even in the third century B.C. There is inscriptional evidence for the continued existence of this school in the second and fourth centuries A.D. by the time of King Harsa (606 – 647 A.D) it became widespread and influential; the king's own sister was a Sammitiya nun. (Murty, p.20-21) Although barely orthodox, they were at times strong in numbers, as we can see from the fact that Yuan Tsang in the 7th Century counted 60000 personalist monks, out of the total 200000 in the whole of India.

It was a fundamental dogma of Buddhist Philosophy that personality is the token of falsehood and that no idea of "self", in which ever from it might appear, ought to have a place in the conception of reality as it actually is. The personalists challenge this position and claimed that in addition to the impersonal dharma there is still a Person to be reckoned with. They could adduce much scriptural authority in favour of their views. They were, for instance, fond of quoting the remark: "One person when He is born in the world, is born for the will of the many. Who is that one person? He is the Tathagta". Their opponents had to admit these and many other passages, but they maintained that they do not mean what they say, since in them the Buddha only conformed to the linguistic usages of an ignorant world.

The Personalist on the other hand taught that the Person is a reality in the ultimate sense which provides a common factor or link for the successive processes occurring in a self-identical individual, over many lives, upto Buddhahood. At the same time the pudgalavadins took great care to define the relation of the Person to the Skandhas in such a way as not to contradict the essential principles of the Buddha's teaching, and so as to exclude the "erroneous belief in a self". "The Person is neither identical with the skandhas, nor is he in the skandhas nor outside them", so they taught. He provides, as we

would put it, a kind of “structural unity” in the psycho-physical elements. As such he is “ineffable”, undefinable in every respect whatsoever. A man’s true, transcendental Self is indeed so subtle that only the Buddhas can see it. (Ewards Conze,p.20)

Edwards Conze says that **the** Pudgalavadins represented the reaction of common sense against the improbabilities of the dharma theory in its more uncompromising form, they provided over the centuries a constant irritant to the disputants of other sects, and in some ways they were the forerunners of Mahayana philosophy. There exists a close analogy between the Pudgala and the Suchness or Emptiness, of the Madhyamikas, and the “store-consciousness of the Yogacarins had many of the functions which the Personalists assigned to *Pudgala*.(Ewards Conze,p.20)

Adherents of the Pudgala claim that it is neither the same nor different from the aggregate. If it were the same as the aggregates then the pudgala will be conditioned, and when the aggregates were destroyed the person would be destroyed. This would be annihilationist and it would also entail that after death the *Tathagata* certainly could not be said to exist. In that case why did the Buddha refuse to answer the question concerning whether or not the Tathagata exists after death? Buddha’s answer to the question raised in the *Suttanipata*: “Is the one who has achieved the goal annihilated or is he eternally free from illness? And the Buddha’s answer was: There is no measure of (or means of knowing) him who has achieved the goal. That by which one could define him (ie.,words or description), that is not for him. When all phenomena (dhamma) are removed, then all means of description are also removed. (David J. Kalupahana, p.80, 81) On the other hand if the pudgala were different from aggregates it would be unconditioned, in fact a self like the atman and subject to all the Buddhist criticism of the concept of a self. This would be to fall into the great mistake of eternalism. Thus the pudgala is neither identical to nor different from the aggregates, and neither conditioned nor unconditioned. In fact it is said to be indefinable. The pudgala is the subject of experience, the doer of wholesome and unwholesome deeds, the one that undergoes karmic results, and pudgala is also said to be what transmigrates. It is the pudgala that attains nirvana. Unsurprisingly opponents felt that this is in fact the atman in another guise. The so-called pudgala

necessarily must be reducible to the dharmas which make up the aggregates— in which case the pudgalavadins would hold the same view as other Buddhists—or must be a separate reality, in which case the pudgalavadins would hold the atman position of Brahmanic Hindus.

And yet it appears that the pudgalavadins were wrestling with genuine philosophical problem and their position is perhaps subtler than it is often portrayed. The vatsiputriya-Sanmmitiya tradition may have had a particular interest in Vinaya matters in which case their concern with personhood could have been significant in terms of an interest in moral responsibility. It is indeed persons who engage in moral acts, and attain enlightenment. For moral responsibility there has to be some sense in which the same person receives reward or punishment as the one who did the original deed. It is persons who have experiences of love and hate. All this, as pudgalavada sources make clear, has to be taken as given. The question is, what is the status of personhood? It is arguable that personhood is an irreducible datum and cannot be explained away in terms of constructions out of arms, legs, feelings, intentions and so on and so forth, or a series of ever-changing mental and physical moments. Constructions presuppose the existence of persons and it is also arguable that if we cannot say the same person is reborn or the same person attains nirvana, there would be no point in considering rebirth or the spiritual path. If all this is correct then personhood would not be reducible to the aggregates. And yet it is also clear that it makes no sense to think of personhood as a separate real thing, as if it could float free from the living beings of arms, legs, feelings and so on. Personhood is a different logical category from arms and legs. If we were to take a living human being or a tree apart we would not find personhood or treeness, as an additional component. Thus it seems that it makes sense to speak of an irreducible datum which is neither the same nor different from the constituents.

Possibly it was something like this that the pudgalavadins were thinking of when they started by speaking of the pudgala as a reality existing from the ultimate point of view, before switching to speaking of the pudgala as a conceptualised in dependence upon the aggregates. The pudgalavadins were constrained almost to the point of absurdity by the language of Buddhist Scholasticism. The pudgala in itself, personhood in itself, cannot be spoken of.

One can only speak of personhood in dependence upon living beings with i.e. arms, legs, feelings and so on. Even if personhood is not reducible to arms, legs, feelings, and so on. Thus personhood in itself is indeed indefinable, it is *sui generis*, and personhood can be spoken of, conceptualised in dependence upon the aggregates, without this making personhood a conceptual construction(*prajnapiti*) in the way in which this is understood by other Buddhist schools, reducible to the aggregates. Yet personhood is also not a separate reality (*dravya*) capable of being encountered apart from the aggregates. Personhood is not itself a conditioned thing in the way that e.g. the human body is, and for the pudgalavadin personhood continues from life of life and into enlightenment. Nevertheless personhood also could not be an unconditioned dharma or an atman. (William.P, p.126-128)

Thus, pudgalvada maintains that along with the skandhas there is a soul (pudgala), which persists, and passes from one life to another. By this attempt to restore the ontological existence or identity of soul as a substance pudgalavada has logically justified the karma, rebirth or transmigration theory of Buddha. In the words of K.Satchidananda Murty; “while it (pudgala) is not identical with or different from the body, it has awareness of the body and its movements. It is different from the mind (*citta*, *vijnana*), and is the perceiver. The pudgala ceases to be when Nirvana is attained. Pudgala is thus one sort of soul theory, accepted by some Buddhist schools at all times, in spite of sustained attempts to refute it by some of the best Buddhist thinkers like Tissa, Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu and Santaraksita, from Asokan times to the eighth century A.D” (Murty, p.21)

Works Consulted

1David J.Kalupahana., *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*,The University Press of Hawaii, 1976

1. Edward Conze, *A Short History of Buddhism*, Chetana Ltd, Bombay, 1960
2. K. Ramakrishna Rao., *Philosophy of Identity: From personal to Global Human Identity*, Interim World Philosophy Congress, 2006
3. K.Satchidananda Murty, *Philosophy In India:Tradition,Teaching &Research* ICPR/Motilal Banarsidass, 1991.

4. M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1975
5. Paul Williams with Anthony Tribe, *Buddhist Thought: A complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*, Routledge, London and New York, 2002
6. Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teaching, history and Practices*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1990
7. Upadhyaya. K. N, *Buddhism Path to Nirvana*, Radha Soami Satsang Beas, Punjab, India 2010 & 2014)

Dear Students of M.A/B.A (Hons)

This study material is based on one of my research papers. I have simplified some portion of the paper for your convenience. Although it is more useful for the M.A students of Sem.IV yet students of other semester of M.A and also of B.A can take the help of this study material for understanding the basic ontological features of Buddhism vis-a-vis its later school of Pudgalvada.

Shailesh Kumar Singh

Professor, Department of Philosophy

A.N.College, Patna