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THE SELF: Metaphysical Reality *vs* Communicative Device

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Abstract: The objective of this article is to juxtapose the non-Buddhist and the Buddhist viewpoints of Indian philosophy on the notion of the self in order to see the rationality behind their conceptions. To pursue this objective, the paper is divided into four sections. The introductory section points to various usages of the expression 'self' in common parlance, which tends to encompass everything that matters to an individual. The second section describes various approaches adopted by the major systems of Indian philosophy towards the self. It is shown that the conception of the self as a metaphysical substance is more amenable to those Indian philosophical systems that believe in the plurality of individual selves. The third section is mainly concerned with the Buddhist counter-narrative to the notion of substantive metaphysical self. Since the parsimony of the Buddhist proposal lies in its metaphysical non-proliferation, the linguistic entities such as the self (*jīva*) or soul (*ātman*) purportedly referring to a substantive entity are declared metaphysically vacuous, but the convention of language enables us to pick out the intended referent which is nothing but individual person. Thus the above metaphysical concepts of the non-Buddhist systems of Indian philosophy turn out to be a 'communicative device' in Buddhism, without any metaphysical bearing.

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1. Introduction

It is more than a truism to say that the understanding of the self has a bearing on the understanding of the other. The other is nothing but the self and therefore the perception of a division between the two is erroneous, the other is numerically distinct but qualitatively same as the self, the other is the 'possibilities' of the self, are some illustrative examples each indicating a specific notion of the self. The self is, thus, understood in various ways ranging from the notion of a robust metaphysical reality to an ontologically vacuous linguistic entity. In a poetic language, William James (1842-1910) describes the variegated usages of the notion Self:

> … a man's *Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his*, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his cloths and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account. All these things give him the same emotions. If they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant; if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down … The constituents of the Self … make up respectively: (a) the material Self; (b) the social Self; (c) the spiritual Self; and (d) the pure ego.[1]

Some would say that it is a simple active substance, the soul, of which they are thus conscious; others claim that it is nothing but a fiction, the imaginary being denoted by the pronoun I; and between these extremes of opinion all sorts of intermediaries would be found.[2]

The range of the meanings of the 'self' in the above quote is enough to baffle one's mind as to what could be the truth of the

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[1]William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983, 279-80. The term "Self" with capital letter "S" is intended to refer to its wider applicability, that is, meaning differently in different contexts. CAN is conspicuous in the italic part. "Self" means *me* as much as *mine*.

[2]James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 286.

self. A definite answer to this question is essential in as much as it is the understanding of the self which enables one to adopt a perspective towards the other—a *sine qua non* to all behavioural transactions with the other. What follows is a survey of the insights available in major Indian philosophical systems with respect to the self. An attempt is made to bring these insights into two broad categories, namely, metaphysical reality and communicative device.

2. Perspectives towards the Self in the Philosophies of India

In Indian philosophy, the metaphysical exploration with regard to the self generally proceeds with three considerations:

(1) What is it that gives life to a human body?

(2) What is it that makes a human being a cognitive agent?

(3) What unifies different experiences of a human being so that he or she identifies himself or herself as the same person undergoing different experiences at different times?

These three considerations, stated differently, relate to the principle of life or animation, the principle of cognition, and the principle of unity and continuity of experience respectively.[3] The self (aka *ātman*, *jīvātman*, *puruṣa*, etc.) is regarded as a fundamental metaphysical reality by all systems of Indian philosophy except the Cārvāka and Buddhism, and it is believed to perform the above three functions of animation, cognition and unification. It gives life to the physical body of an organism.[4] When the self departs from the (*sthūla*—i. e., gross) body, the body loses its regenerative force and disintegrates into its constituting elements.

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[3]A philosophical analysis of this observation can be seen in Anthony Quinton's article "The Soul," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 59, no. 15, (July 1962): 393-409.

[4]Matthew Kapstein discusses 'personalistic vitalism' in this sense of the self. According to this theory "there is a particular substance which is at once the self-conscious subject, the ground for personal identity through time, and which, when appropriately associated with a functional animal body, causes that body to be alive." Matthew T. Kapstein, "Śāntarakṣita on the Fallacies of Personalistic Vitalism," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 17, 1989, 44.

The self carries all along with it the life force (*prāṇa*), senses (*indriyas*), mind (*manas*) and the residual impressions (*saṁskāras*) brought forth from the previous and present states of existence. These accompanying factors are cumulatively called subtle body (*sūkṣma śarīra*). The cumulative effect of impressions appropriates a gross body to which the *prāṇa* enlivens and in which the senses live for the self. Thus, the self is believed to be the actual cognitive agent that requires a physical body for its cognitive (and other) operations. With the help of sense-organs, the self acquires knowledge about the world. Also, it functions as the unifying substance between discrete experiences and thereby gives rise to the sense of 'I', which becomes the locus of all thoughts, experiences, hopes and desires. This metaphysical self is regarded the essence of a human being.

In the Ṛg Veda, the term '*ātman*' is often used to refer to the essence of beings in general. For instance, at one place the term '*ātmā*' is used to denote the essence of gods as well as the world[5] and the broader application includes the essence of everything—natural forces, medicinal plants, and the essence of the addressee. The diversity of the usages of the term '*ātman*' in the Vedic literature enables one to retroject into it the multiple senses of the self developed by systemic philosophies in India later. The later appellations such as *ātman*, *jīvātman*, *puruṣa*, etc. are aptly used to refer to the essence of living beings.

One may however contend that the above metaphysical entities cannot be consistently maintained to be the bearer of the identity of an individual. For, when we use the term 'self', we often mean a person's 'personality' or 'character' in virtue of which one person differs from the others. Being the essence of all beings, the '*ātman*' cannot be appropriately rendered as the 'self' (or 'soul'). Since the essence of all beings is qualitatively (one may say substantially also) the same, and the self cannot *suo motu* confer any individuating determinations on any organism, let alone be the identifying feature of a human person. No wonder if

[5] *Ātmā devānām bhuvanasya garbho*, Sri Ram Sharma Acarya, ed. & trans., *Ṛg Veda*, Shantinikunja: Brahmavarcasa, Vol. 4, Maṇḍala 9-10, 1996, 10.168.4.

one doubts whether a person is an embodied-*ātman* at all in this broad or universalistic sense of the term. Contrasted with this, there is also a narrow or individualistic notion of *ātman*, which does not find its explicit expression owing to the preponderantly cosmogonical approach of the early Vedic thinkers. However, subsequently, this sense becomes pronounced in the Upaniṣads. The Upaniṣads not only talk about individual essence and the essence of the universe, but also eventually declare identity between the two. However, this equation does not enlighten us in regard to the emergence of individuality any more than the permutations of universal elements beget the sense of individuality. *Ātman* is the beginningless underlying reality of everything existing. In contradistinction to '*ātman*', the term '*jīva*' or '*jīvātman*' is used to refer to an individual. According to the Advaitic reading of the Upaniṣads, *jīva* has a beginning and an end—it begins its journey with the sense of individuality and submerges its individuality in the supreme reality in the end. Therefore, it is not taken to be immortal in its individual form.[6]

The *jīva* or the individual self is not mortal either; it is essentially the *ātman* coupled with the mind, senses and body. Contrary to the Advaitic conception, the term '*jīva*' is used to refer to an immortal 'individual being' prominently by those philosophical systems which accept the plurality of individual selves in their fundamental ontology. Jainism and the theistic Vedānta traditions (namely, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita Vedāntins) use the term precisely in this sense. The combined system of Sāṅkhya-Yoga uses the term '*puruṣa*' for the same purpose. The Naiyāyikas use the term '*jīvātman*' in the same sense. Despite

[6]In the *Vedānta Paribhāṣā* of Dharmarāja Adhvarīndra (trans. Sw. Madhvananda, Kolkata: Advaita Ashram, 12th reprint 2011), four kinds of dissolutions are discussed. They are *nitya* (the dissolution of all manifest activities during profound sleep state), *prākṛta* (the dissolution of all effects), *naimittika* (the withdrawal of all worlds into the Creator) and *ātyantika* (the dissolution of all individualities consequent on the realization of Brahman). It is the last kind of dissolution where the individualities end due to an absolute dispelling of nescience (172-3).

notable internal differences on the nature of the self, these non-Advaita systems concur on the individualistic notion of *ātman* and accept this individual unchanging metaphysical entity as the ultimate (metaphysical) base of individuality. One may consider the Sāṁkhya arguments for the plurality of selves as representative of this view.

The Buddhists however are quite insistent on denying the existence of such an unchanging entity. Their major argument rests on the doctrine of impermanence (*anitya*), rather momentariness (*kṣaṇikatva*), which advocates for an incessant change in the reality (*sat*) which is a necessary condition for any reality to be causally efficacious (*arthakriyākāri*). For any object to produce an effect, it must undergo change, according to the Buddhists. The 10th-11th century CE Nyāya thinker Udayanācārya fights tooth and nail against this argument of the Buddhists in the very first part of his *Ātmatattvaviveka*.[7] He says, *inter alia*, that a necessary relation between the reality and momentariness is unfounded (*asiddha*), therefore we cannot consistently derive the nature of reality proposed by the Buddhists.

2.1 Consideration of Multiple Approaches

Considering the diversity of opinions on the notion of individuality, one can sort out three fundamental approaches in the later systemic development of classical Indian philosophy. These different approaches are based on the variations in the metaphysical commitments of different philosophical systems. They are: (1) the multiplicity of selves approach, (2) the monistic or absolutistic approach, and (3) the false grammar approach.

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[7]Udayanācārya, "*Kṣaṇabhaṅgavāda*," *Ātmatattvaviveka*, Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1986. Both, impermanence and momentariness show the changing character of the reality. However, whereas the former grants the durational presence of an object, the latter proposes an incessant change. Udayana argues against the latter position which, in some sense, logical corollary of the former because unless we accept a persistent change in the object, an account of its impermanence seems impossible.

According to the first viewpoint, there is a plurality of individual selves, one such self resides in each person's body. A person is thus an embodied self. This approach is adopted by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, Jainism, the Sāṅkhya-Yoga, the Mīmāṁsā and the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta systems of philosophy. The Advaita Vedānta also espouses the multiplicity of selves view at the phenomenal (*vyavahāra*) level. The self, as these systems believe, is located[8] in the heart (*hṛdaya*) of a person. If the self is the essence of an individual, and all the individual selves are qualitatively indistinguishable one from another, then all persons are essentially the same. However, persons are recognized as distinct individuals in virtue of their having some adventitious properties. Should one then suggest that the principle of individuation is determined by some accidental (material) properties? The Naiyāyikas rule out such a possibility. For them, though the selves are qualitatively indistinguishable, yet they are numerically distinct in virtue of having certain distinctive features. According to their metaphysical belief, all indivisible and eternal substances, including the selves, involve a uniqueness called 'particularity' or 'individuality' (*viśeṣa*). These substances are distinct from other

[8]Conspicuously, every Indian philosophical system considers heart, the most vital organ in our body, to be the residing place of consciousness. We may call it the cardiovascular interpretation of consciousness as opposed to the neurophysiological interpretation of the Western philosophical systems, particularly cognitive sciences. In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, the *ātman* is described as residing in the lotus of heart and is smaller than a grain of paddy, than a barely corn, than a mustard seed, than a grain of millet or the kernel of a grain of millet. After that, it is paradoxically asserted that this *ātman* is greater than the earth, than the sky, than the heaven and than all these worlds (*eṣa ma ātmā antaḥ hṛdaye aṇīyānvrīhervā yavādvā sarṣapādvā śyāmākādvā śyāmāktaṇḍulādvaiṣa ma ātmāntarahṛdaye jyāyānpṛthivyā jyāyāntarikṣajjyāyāndivo jyāyānebhyo lokebhyaḥ*, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 3.14.3, Swahananda Swami, trans., Madras: Sri Rama Krishna Matha, 1980). The paradoxical expressions seem indicating the ineffable character of *ātman*.

members of their own class due to *viśeṣa*, which is the basis of absolute differentiation and specification.[9]

But, the positing of this unique feature should be seen as an effort to maintain the particularity of indistinguishable entities which are non-composite and eternal. Ramakrishna Puligandla interprets *viśeṣa* "as the peculiarity by virtue of which something is an ultimate entity."[10] This is how the Naiyāyikas seek to provide metaphysical support to the commonplace belief in the multiplicity of individuals. The rest of the systems also accept the multiplicity of selves to account for individual difference in terms of different subjects.

The second approach is monistic or absolutistic in outlook. The diversity of the phenomenal reality springs from a fundamental reality, which is not diverse. The diversity, from this perspective, is only apparent. The Advaitins are the main proponent of this viewpoint. For them, the Self (Brahman or *ātman*) is the only reality, which is non-dual, undifferentiated, immutable, transcendental consciousness (this theory may be called Spiritualistic Monism). The individual consciousnesses (*jīvas*) are mere false appearances of universal consciousness or Brahman. We identify ourselves as distinct individuals only for worldly purposes. Moreover, this false identification is originally ingrained in metaphysical ignorance of the true nature of reality. Hence, ignorance (*avidyā*) is the determining principle of individuation. Such ignorance induces a false perception which, in turn, is binding on the individual, it is also called causal body (*kāraṇa śarīra*).[11] In the process of the formation of human personality, the causal body occasions an appropriate subtle-body

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[9]*Anyatra-antyebhyo viṣeśebhyaḥ* (1.2.6), meaning that which exists as the differentiator (*atyanta-vyāvṛttibuddhi-hetuḥ*) of the end-substances is called *viśeṣa*, from *The Sacred Books of the Hindus*, Vol. VI - *The Vaiśeṣikasūtra of Kaṇāda* ed., B. D. Basu, trans., Nandalal Sinha, Allahabad: Bhuvaneśwarī Āśrama, 1923.

[10]Ramakrishna Puligandla, *Fundamentals of Indian Philosophy*, New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 2005, 170.

[11]Vidyāraṇyamuni, *Pañcadaśī*, Krishnanada Sagar, trans., Uttar Kashi: Shri Totakacharya Ashrama, 1984, 1.17.

(*sūkṣma śarīra*). The subtle body is said to be the combination of five sensory modalities (*jñānendriyas*), five motor organs (*karmendriyas*), five vital forces (*prāṇas*), mind (*manas*), and intellect (*buddhi*).[12] This body is also called the mark body (*liṅga śarīra*). The mark body appropriates a gross body (*sthūla śarīra*), which is constitutive of the five gross elements (*mahābhūtas*).

What is significant here is the distinction between the causal body, the subtle body and the gross body. Actually, these are not three numerically distinct bodies (relating to an individual); rather they all house one personality and in this process the former causes the latter. What is sensually available is only the gross body; other bodies are conditions of the gross body. But the formation of a particular gross body depends on the programming of the subtle body, which is the receptacle of the residual impressions of previous deeds performed by the individual under the spell of ignorance. It is the subtle body, which transmigrates and thus continues the cycle of death and birth.

According to another analysis of human personality,[13] the gross body, which is the composition of amalgamated five elements of materiality (*pañcīkṛta-mahabhutas*), is called *annamayakosa* and is sustained by food. The five vital forces (five *prāṇas*) along with the five motor-organs form *prāṇamayakosa*. As it is believed, they draw their forces from individual consciousness (*dehī* or *jīvātmā*).[14] The *prāṇas* are subtler than the gross elements and thus they are regarded as superior to the physical elements. The next thing of greater subtlety is our mental make-up, which is called *manomayakosa*. It consists of mind and the five sense-organs which are responsible for all our experiences. It is the mind which generates the sense of 'I-' or 'Ego-consciousness' in us. Subtler still than the ego-consciousness is the intellect or ideational consciousness (*vijñānamayakosa*), which receives glimpses of pure

[12]Vidyāraṇyamuni, *Pañcadaśī*, 1.22-23.

[13]*Īśādi-nau-Upaniṣad: Iśa, Kena, Kaṭha, Praśna, Muṇḍaka, Māṇḍūkya, Aitareya, Taittirīya and Śvetāśvatara*, Hrikrishna Das Goyandaka, trans., Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 13th edition 1993. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, 2.2-5.

[14]*Īśādi-nau-Upaniṣad*, *Kaṭhopaniṣad*, 2.2.3-5.

and blissful consciousness (*ānandamayakosa*). The *prāṇamaya*, *manomaya* and *vijñānamaya kosas* constitute the subtle body. The *ānandamayakosa* is the innermost and subtlest substratum of all other *kosas*. It is also called the causal body or *kāraṇa śarīra*. What is called *ātman* pervades all the five grades of human personality and is progressively identified with everything from the grossest level to the subtlest one in the journey of spiritual development. Since these realizations are believed to be liberating, they cannot be called the result of *māyā* and ignorance.

Given many frames of reference of the term *ātman*, any attempt to reduce it to only one of them would create problem. However, amidst all the variegated senses, the prominent sense is the 'essence' or the crucial aspect of a being. For instance, the most intimate bodily process on which the life of an organism is dependent is breathing. In view of this anatomical fact, the Vedic seers identify *ātman* with the life force (*prāṇa*), the force that makes breathing possible. And, with the same fervent, they equate *ātman* with the mind, senses etc.—the factors which are crucial for the life of an individual. But when the question as to the true nature of atman comes, all such equations are gradually denied retaining one: the essence of life or the underlying reality of everything. In this sense, we can understand the Upaniṣadic proclamation of identity between individual essence and cosmic essence.

Individual essence is incarnated in the substantial form of *ātman*, *jīva* or *puruṣa* in the later systemic philosophies. This metaphysical essence is believed to underlie all experiences of an individual in virtue of being the hub of the body (cause, subtle and gross). But it seems a folly to hold this (universal) principle responsible for the formation of individual life births after birth. The problem becomes more intractable when this principle is said to be present in the body even when all other associates depart from the body to render it dead.[15] This discussion shows that the principle of individuality can be anything but the (universal) *ātman*. One may conjecture that the principle of individuation can only be matter. It is the material or physical aspect of human

[15] *Īśādi-nau-Upaniṣad*, *Kaṭhopaniṣad*, 2.2.4.

personality that provides ground for distinguishing one person from another. The principle of individuation is nothing but the function of material composition (Materialistic Monism). Classical Indian philosophical systems talk of individuating criteria in the framework of bodily categories, namely, causal body (*kārmaṇa śarīra*), subtle body (*sūkṣma śarīra*) and gross body (*sthūla śarīra*). Karel Werner[16] also develops his thesis on the Vedic notion of '*tanu*', which is purportedly a quasi-physical-essence of a person and can be kept alive in a heavenly realm through prescribed ritualistic performances. In common Hindi parlance, the term '*tanu*' is used to denote 'body', which is an evident marker of an individual person. In the Ṛg Veda, this term is often used to refer to the physical aspect of beings.[17] But, as Radhakrishnan remarks, there is no such thing as the individual centre of life at the biological level.[18] All organisms are equal in terms of their physiology except, of course, some graduated functional differences. But, taking cue from one's own feeling, one always wonders whether this is all that there is to individuate human personality, or there is a further fact beyond the merely physical. The *śarīras* (i.e., mere physical) are not capable of existing independently; they lean on an independent principle, namely, the self (*ātman*). There are different positions though regarding whether there is just one *ātman* or many.

The self (*ātman*), as described in the *Kaṭhopaniṣad*,[19] is free from the fetters of birth and death (*aja*) and is not subject to cause and effect (*na ayaṁ kutscinna babhūva kascit*). It is eternal (*nitya* or *śāśvata*) and essentially conscious (*vipaścit*). The self is often described in contradictory terms[20] indicating the inadequacy of the language to capture it in entirety. The nature of the self is felt to be beyond the reach of the categories of understanding.

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[16]Karel Werner, "Indian Concepts of Human Personality in Relation to the Doctrine of the Soul," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 1 (1988): 73-97.

[17]Ṛg Veda, 10.116.5, 10.157.3, 10.183.2 etc.

[18]S. Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View of Life*, New Delhi: Indus, 1994, 271.

[19]*Īśādi-nau-Upaniṣad*, *Kaṭhopaniṣad*, 1.2.18.

[20]*Īśādi-nau-Upaniṣad*, *Kaṭhopaniṣad*, 1.2.21.

However, in its individuated form, the self is said to be 'the owner of the body' (*rathinaṁ*).[21] In the Advaitic interpretation, the individuated forms of the self are mere appearances or distorted reflections of the non-dual universal self. But, this Upaniṣadic insight is developed into the full-blooded individualistic conception of *ātman* by the pluralist systems of Indian philosophy such as the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, the Saṅkhya-Yoga, and the Mīmāṁsā. The intuitive plausibility of the acceptance of the existence of a distinct non-physical self in every individual is traceable in the psychological necessity to account for the differences in the unity and ownership of experiences.

But, the same intuitive suggestion may also be counter-intuitive from the Buddhists' perspective. For, they question the idea of a non-physical eternal substance and explain the unity of a mental life without resorting to any such queer entity. Also, they analyze human personality without using any such metaphysical principle as the self. Since our experiential knowledge reveals everything in the world as transient, the acceptance of the existence of the self as an unchanging entity is unwarranted. It has further repercussions in the understanding the meanings of personal pronouns. This leads us to the third viewpoint, which may be called the 'false grammar approach'.

3. The False Grammar Approach

The tendency to look for a fixed referent of the term 'I' or other personal pronouns is connected with the unitary feeling in our experiences. Radhakrishnan says that we have such a feeling in virtue of being a self-conscious being: "Self-consciousness is like a chord which is able to bind and keep together all the discrete experiences of an individual."[22] Self-consciousness is generally understood as the consciousness of an individual who considers himself or herself as the subject of manifold experiences. The linguistic correlates of the subjects of experiences are the personal pronouns. The 'referential demand' of these pronominal indexicals is such that one is gullibly inclined to believe in the

[21] *Īśādi-nau-Upaniṣad*, *Kaṭhopaniṣad*, 1.3.3.

[22] Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View*, 278.

ontology of queer or mysterious individual entities or subjects.[23] Thus, what seems to be an innocuous fact of grammar may turn out to be an unwarranted metaphysical hypostatization. According to the Buddhist logicians, being mental constructions, the linguistic symbols fail to refer to the actual reality because they are afflicted with our tendency to associate the experiences with name, genus etc. (*kalpanā*). The Buddhist tradition, therefore, invests much of its energy to make sense of the self as subject or person (Pāli, *puggala*; Sanskrit, *pudgala*) as such not as a referent of language.[24]

3.1 The Self as Subject or Person

The individualistic conception of the self presumes an irreducible uniqueness in every human individual in virtue of which he or she is an individual as opposed to a collective or a group. The search for the metaphysical underpinning of such uniqueness often results in accepting the existence of a queer immaterial substance, an enduring substratum of changing experiences, which is often conceived on the analogy of a physical thing. Thus the self-same substance is said to be a subject of all experiences. Ordinarily, a subject is defined as a being which has experiences, either of something in existence or purely imaginary or of

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[23]Jose Nandhikkara, "Human Subjectivity: A Philosophical Investigation after Wittgenstein," *Journal of Dharma*, 33.1 (January-March 2008), 19-32. By referring to Wittgenstein, Nandhikkara observes that the expressions such as "'soul', 'spirit', 'mind', 'reason', 'will', etc., are not used to refer to something in the way 'body' refers to a body…we need to look and see the actual uses of these words in relation to human being" (20). They are meaningful in relation to human subjectivity and any further assumption would take us beyond the purport of these terms. Also see Jose Nandhikkara, *Being HUman after Wittgenstein: A Philosophical Anthropology*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2011.

[24]For instance, in the *Puggalapaññattipāli*, the fourth work of the Buddhist cannon *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, human personality is analyzed without any reference to eternal self. See for details *Abhidhammapiṭake Puggalapaññattipāli*, trans. Om Prakash Pathak with Veena Gaur, Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corporation, 2000.

something entirely abstract. The concept of subject is basically tied up with the epistemological sense of a person. The subject is generally understood as 'the subject of different experiences'. One considers oneself as the same subject of various experiences. And this consideration is based on one's ability to identify oneself as a continuing person.

A subject or person is thus regarded as the persistent substratum of all thoughts and therefore the enabling condition of knowledge, recognition and retention. However, it has been a matter of dispute whether there actually is such a unique metaphysical substance. Buddhism explains our natural belief in the existence of such an entity as a fictional construct of the imagination. However, even if there is an ineffable metaphysical substance, how can it be turned to itself to know it objectively? The paradox of understanding the subject in objective terms is quite pronounced in Yājñavalkya's wondering about how the subject can be made part of an objective knowledge.[25] A subject cannot make itself an object of its own knowledge in the way things other than itself (the subject) can be objects of its knowledge. For, the subject is the very source of knowledge. Hence the subject pole stands diametrically opposed to the object pole, and both the poles are flanked by experience.

The existence of the subject is accepted as a self-evidencing fact, since everyone has an unmistakable belief in one's own existence. Everyone has an inner access to one's subjectivity. And because of this direct access, knowledge of the subject, or self-knowledge, involves a higher certitude than knowledge of an object. The knowledge of anything other than one's own existence is a mediated knowledge, and therefore the reliability of the medium becomes a significant factor for the veracity of such mediated knowledge. On the other hand, due to the immediate and self-evidencing nature of self-knowledge, its certainty is evident. The unerring awareness of one's subjectivity is emphasized by K. C. Bhattacharyya with reference to the notion

[25] *Yenedam sarvam vijānāti tam kena vijānīyāt*, meaning everything is known by the knower, but who is to know the knower? *Īśādi-nau-Upaniṣad*, *Bṛahdāraṇyaka Upaniṣad,* 285.

of meaning. In his view, while the object of knowledge is what is meant by the knowing subject, the subject is other than the object and is therefore not a meant entity. The subject, being the 'meaner', can of course not be the 'meant'.[26]

What exactly is the reason for saying that self-knowledge is not a matter of knowing anything with a meant content? We may try to examine this question in a manner that involves our extrapolation on the unique nature of the subject as self. Objective knowledge is that of a meant entity inasmuch as it is knowledge of what it means to be this or that object. And understanding what it means to be a certain object depends on our knowledge of what predicates are true of the object. Objective knowledge is therefore a matter of our having predicative access to the object in question. Self-knowledge is subjective, and knowledge of subjectivity must have a peculiarity in virtue of which self-knowledge amounts to knowledge of something without any meant content. Bhattacharyya conceives of self-knowledge as a non-predicative or non-attributive mode of knowing the subject. In distinguishing self-knowledge from knowledge of objects, he remarks: "The object is known as distinct from the subject but the subject is known in itself and felt to be free from the object."[27] While this sounds like an innocuous remark on the distinctness of the subject from the object, there is something significant in it in so far as reference is made to the subject's feeling of freedom from the object.

Since self-knowledge is said to be knowledge of the subject in itself, it implies that this knowledge is acquired by the subject by being independent of its usual objective association with other things. This independence from objective association of the subject with the world of objects is to be understood as a condition for the possibility of true self-knowledge. It is a condition of recognizing the self from the non-predicative standpoint. Once the subject is able to dissociate itself from the objective order, the non-predicative attitude of self-perception

[26]K. C. Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Philosophy*, Gopinatha Bhattacharyya, ed., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983, 367.

[27]Bhattacharyya, *Studies*, 385. Emphasis added.

becomes naturally available to the subject. For, all predicative self-recognition is due to the association of the self with the world of objects. To be the subject in itself is, therefore, to be free from the predicative way of viewing oneself, and so to be free from objective association.

Moreover, any process of the predicative mode of self-identification results in the objectification of the subject. Once the self is so objectified, the question of its ontological status becomes prominent. It then opens up the floodgate of metaphysical controversy.[28] While this is the way K. C. Bhattacharyya's reflections on the nature of the subject indicates the possibility of an avoidable metaphysical controversy over the nature of the self, it also has relevance to the same controversy that occurs between the Buddhists and the non-Buddhists. What makes the former case relevant to the latter is the common point of the predicative mode of determining the reality of the self. This commonality is most prominent in the case of the Nyāya arguments for the existence of the self as the locus of immaterial properties. In identifying the self as the substratum of properties like cognition, desire, pleasure, pain, etc., the self is already objectified inasmuch as its existence is characterized in terms of these psychological predicates. Even though the individual self is said to be substratum of these psychological states, it is still an object (*padārtha*) whose reality is defined in terms of these properties.

The Buddhist contention of such a view of the self is in terms of replacing the self-talk by talk about psychophysical properties alone, or at best the five aggregates (*pañcaskandhas*). The alleged eternal substance is dropped out of the picture. What we call a person is actually seen to be a unified individual consisting of the psychophysical aggregates, which are in perpetual change. Since the psychophysical aggregates are perceived to be a mutually supportive function of the psychological and equally subtle physical states, which is beyond the level of ordinary awareness, it is natural for us to superimpose a unified personality upon the

[28]Bhattacharyya's remark in this regard is worth quoting: "The metaphysical controversy about the reality of the subject is only about the subject viewed in some sense as object" (*Studies*, 386).

aggregates. However, this reification remains at the level of language, which, according to Buddhism, pragmatically useful though, always tells a lie about the reality. One may however wonder how a deceptive device enables us to pick out the referents from the plural reality.

It may be useful to retrieve what a person recalls, according to Buddhism, of his or her past existences when he or she achieves a certain level of spirituality. The following excerpt is noteworthy:

> In the past existence I was known by such a name. I was born into such a family. I was of such an appearance. I was thus nourished. I enjoyed pleasure thus. I suffered pain thus. My life-span was such. I died in that existence. I was born in other existence. In that (new) existence I was known by such a name. I was born into such a family. I was of such an appearance. I was thus nourished. I enjoyed pleasure thus. I suffered pain thus. My life-span was such. I died in that existence. Then I was born in this existence.[29]

Obviously, the indexical 'I' is performing the role of appropriation in this retrospection. However, one may still wonder what could be the supporting metaphysical ground for the relation between the 'I' of the person who is remembering and his or her past lives, which is accepted by every system of Indian philosophy except Cārvāka. It may be conjectured that the usage of 'I', according to the Buddhists, finds support from the concept of *bhavaṅga-citta*, the undisturbed subterranean stream of consciousness in one's life. This underlying state of consciousness is in a state of passivity precisely because it is undisturbed by any impression, inner or outer. When this consciousness is affected by any stimuli, the resulting state of consciousness is called *vīthi-citta*.[30] It is

[29]Samdhong Rinpoche, ed., *Ten Suttas from Dīgha Nikāya*, Bibliotheca Indo-Tibetica Series No. XII, Sarnath: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, reprint of Burma Piṭaka Association Publication, 1984, 19.

[30]One may see related discussion in Anil K. Tewari, "The Problem of Personal Identity in Buddhism," *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Jan. - Mar. 2007), 93-118.

pertinent to mention here three more relevant and typical Buddhist concepts: *cuti-citta*, i.e., the consciousness of the last moment of one life; *gandhabba-citta*, i.e., the stream consciousness of the deceased person that enters into the zygote; and *paṭisandhi-citta*, i.e., the consciousness of the first moment of the next life. Thus, the stream of consciousness flows from life to life in a cycle of *patisandhi-citta, bhavaṅga-citta, vīthi-citta* and *cuti-citta*.[31] In the *Paṭṭhāna*, the relation between the preceding consciousness and the succeeding consciousness is called *anantara-paccaya*. In the flow of the conscious stream, every moment of the preceding consciousness, which has just ceased, is related to every succeeding consciousness, which has immediately arisen. This relation prevails throughout the recurrent states of an individual life, unless it is eventually stopped by the *khandha-parinibbāna*, that is, the extinction of the five aggregates.[32] For all soteriological purposes this stream may be called the subtle essence of a person that appropriates the gross bodies in different lives.

4. Conclusion

The above discussion clearly indicates two broad categories in which the perspectives of the non-Buddhist and the Buddhist systems of Indian philosophy towards the self can be accommodated. The former may be called an essentialist perspective and the latter a non-essentialist. Cārvāka is always an exception; however it can be accommodated in the non-essentialist category when it comes to reject the notion of an unchanging metaphysical self. But, the metaphysical disagreements never take an unwelcome or inhumane turn in regard to the interrelationship between the self and the other. It can be seen as a point of convergence for common morality in Indian philosophy and this ethos seems to be foundational to the continuation of Indian society and culture. Both the perspectives support the cordiality of relationship between the self and the other in their own ways.

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[31]Bhikkhu J. Kashyapa, *The Abhidhamma Philosophy*, Vol. 1, Delhi: Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, reprint 1982, 165-166.

[32]Kashyapa, *The Abhidhamma Philosophy*, x-xii.

Both believe that freedom from bondage and misery is the highest goal of human life and their philosophical quest for self-understanding and self-realization is therefore continuous with the quest for self-liberation. The non-Buddhists are of the belief that complete self-liberation consists in the realization of the eternal self-substance that lies concealed under the phenomenal existence. For them, what actually happens in the phenomenal concealment of the true self is the formation of the ego, the uncompromisingly individualized I-sense. On this the Buddhist position is both similar and dissimilar to them. The similarity is there in respect of the uncompromising nature of the individualized I-sense being responsible for attachment and misery and therefore selective inclusion or exclusion of the other. However, it is dissimilar in respect of the metaphysical description of the process of self-liberation. There is no eternal self-substance, contend the Buddhists, for us ultimately to realize through the process of dissolution of the ego. On the contrary, the quest for such a metaphysical substance as the definitive condition of liberation is destined to end in metaphysical delusion. Indeed, a necessary condition for attaining liberation is that we understand the futility and misguided search for something that is entirely mythical. For the Buddhists, reality has no place for anything that is unconditioned and permanent in nature.

Everyone has an intimate and strong feeling of the 'ego- or I-sense' and around this one spins one's world of hopes, desires and aspirations. This I-sense is a fact of our conscious existence that is collateral with self-consciousness. The 'self-feeling' is intimately bound up with our immediate experience of self-existence. The very feeling of being oneself as eternal substance, according to the Buddhists, is the root of ego-formation. Owing to this 'I-sense', we conceive of ourselves as the centre of the world, through which the world is 'objectively represented' in terms of distinguishable names and forms. We can talk about the diversity of the world only by presupposing that there are many similar selves perceiving and signifying it. Our relation to the world is thus ego-centric, and the world is uniquely centred in each of us.

Hence, our view of the world from our respective individual ego-specific points of view appears to us to be an inexorable fact about ourselves that becomes a hurdle for the inculcation of the qualities such as tolerance, benevolence, altruism, etc. The metaphysical aspiration of transcending human finitude by transforming oneself into an 'eternal and immutable' self is the proposal of the non-Buddhists to overcome this challenge.

Buddhism is emphatic on the self-defeating nature of the metaphysical aspiration for self-perpetuation in the attainment of an eternal self. Rather than dissolving the ego, the cultivation of this aspiration serves the ego or I-sense in a heightened way. It thus becomes a seemingly ego-overcoming process that actually is ego-perpetuating in disguise. Indeed, it is the delusion of a permanent and immutable self-substance that provides the metaphysical base for uncompromising ego-centricity to be underpinned. Hence the Buddhist recommendation is that we understand our true existential condition as the condition of perpetual change and dependence on the causal complex of reality. Once this understanding is acquired, the delusory quest for the realization of an eternal and substantive self would naturally disappear. Thus both the proposals share a common goal of ego-transcendence, though the two projects differ in respect of the process. What is common to both the metaphysical and the pragmatic programs of ego-transcendence is the ambition of becoming what is described as a 'selfless' person. It is this person who could be in harmony with the other.