

# **Chapter - II**

## THEORY OF NO-SOUL

'Self' as the English equivalent to 'āttā'. 'Self' connotes primarily 'identity' or being what a man is, and therefore it connotes also separation from other individuals. It can also be applied to the moral nature of man and to his ontological reality.

One can detect an implicit contention that the original āttā of Buddhism coincides with the ātman of the Upaniṣads. Early Buddhism accepts the reality of the 'individual self' as a matter of fact. Early Buddhism speaks of the individual self in a way similar to that of Sāṅkhya and Yoga, Jainism etc.

According to the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, the world is originated from the Ātman. The world-creative super divine Ātman as the true, intrinsic self, is directly to be found in each one of us. The first consciousness of the Ātman as the world principle is 'aham asmi', 'I am'. Ātman existing in all is without sin. Ātman as man creates the mortal one, and his creation is the super-creation/ *atīsrṣṭi*.

The Ātman, as the self, is the nearest and dearest of all. The

*Ātman* is the world of gods of all. *Ātman* is the abode of all beings. *Ātman* is silence. The way to indicate it is thus by *neti neti*, it is not this, it is not this.<sup>1</sup> We cannot describe it by any positive content which is always limited by conceptual thought.

*Ātman* was used in the *R̥g-Veda* to denote the ultimate essence of the universe, and on the other the vital breath in man. The self or *Ātman* is generally used in variety of senses, such as, *annamaya*, *prāṇamaya ātman*, *manomaya ātman*, *vijñanamaya ātman* and *ānandamaya ātman*.

Again, in another place of the *Upaniṣad* it has been said that the self is free from sin, free from old age, from death and grief, from hunger and thirst. The "deathless and fearless self is Brahman". The ultimate truth about the self is said that the body is the support of the deathless and the bodiless self. Self lives in all heart. The self is not the effect of any cause. Self-controlled steady man is always guided by his intellect, can easily manage his unmanageable horses i.e., senses and can reach the end of his journey, finds there all pervading spirit.

The all-pervading immortal self is not to be sought by outward knowledge. It is indestructable. It is the light of all lights, which helps us to move around, does its work and returns. The sum and substance of the *Upaniṣadic* teaching is *Ātman* which is identical with Brahman.

It is all the psychic function, an intelligence *prajñānam* by which one can become immortal in heaven. Man is the highest manifestation of the *Ātman* who is also named as Brahman. The *Ātman* is the bridge between this world of being and the world of Brahman.

According to *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* the self is an idea of manifold, viz. (1) materialistic in the body; (2) realistic in the individual soul and idealistic in the sole highest self. The Upaniṣad had discovered that the true self was *ānandam*.<sup>2</sup>

Early Buddhism tacitly presupposes some such idea. Early Buddhist thought was that 'self is nothing but bliss' which is changing sorrow, and what is sorrow is not bliss. Buddhism differs from Upaniṣad in the experiences of the self. Early Pāli scriptures hold that 'there is no permanent essence in our changing experiences'. Changing phenomena are nothing but sorrow and therefore non-self. The ignorant man did not know the Noble Truths and considered himself to be endowed with form (*rūpa*). Buddhism holds that this knowledge of self is delusion or false knowledge. The Upaniṣad accepts the view of permanent self but Buddha denies the same. The body and soul exists only as a complex inter-connected origination,decease, but neither body nor soul has existence as a self-contained substance.

The specific contribution of Buddhism to religious thought lies in its insistence on the doctrine of 'not-self'. The belief in a 'self' is considered by all Buddhists as an indispensable condition to the emergence of suffering. The idea of the concept of "I", is a mere figment of the imagination, with nothing real to correspond to it.

Again Buddhism does not find contention with the intellectual conviction that there is no ego, a Buddhist aims at an entirely new attitude of life. Those who look to it for advice on how to lead a self-less life, may learn a great deal. The greatest contribution of Buddhist 'philosophy' lies in self discipline which the Buddhists imposed upon themselves in order to impress the truth into a part of their own being.<sup>3</sup>

The doctrine of *Anāttā* is very difficult to understand. It will require more than one life-time to get to the bottom of it.

As facts of ultimate reality, we must reject the 'self'. But herein lies an important point to be pointed out; if there is no such thing as a 'self' there is also no such thing as a 'person'. For a 'person' is something which is organised round a supposed inner core, a central growing point 'a self'. A psychologist says that the self is the organising function within the individual. It is prior to, not the object of our sciences, it is presupposed in the fact that one can be scientist.

Man is a very limited being with a dated existence. Man has

the ability to deal with the past, which may be kept alive through memory.

The self has, up to the present, defied adequate description and definition. It is apparently the case that the difficulty lies not in our intelligence, tools and so forth, but in the nature of the very concept of "self". Terms like life, self and God are difficult to define because non-circular definitions seem to distort their nature. While we cannot define self to our satisfaction, it is nevertheless an important factor and concept. Some would say that the self is the important factor in human life.

In European conception, there is a complete gap between the nature of the universe and their mode of life. Arthur Schopenhauer and Herbert Spencer for instance, at once come to mind. In Buddhism, on the contrary, the entire stress lies on the removal of attachment to this world. A merely theoretical proposition such as "there is no ego" would be regarded as utterly useless.

All the Indian systems except Buddhism and Cārvāka admit the existence of a permanent entity called *Ātman* or *Jīva*. Different schools of Indian philosophy describe *ātman*, *puruṣa* or *jīva* differently. Nyāya calls it absolutely attributeless and characterless, in determinate unconscious entity, Sāṃkhya describes it being of the nature of pure

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consciousness. The Vedāntā says that it is that pure consciousness (*cit*) pure bliss (*ānanda*) and pure being (*sat*).

The Jaina like the Mīmāṃsakas maintain that the self is consciousness. But they regard it as identity and difference. The nature of the self is not pure spirituality as in the Brahma doctrine of the Upaniṣad. The soul, according to Jaina, are the bearer of all mental processes, are efficient and capable of action.

All the systems agree in holding that it is pure and unsettled in its nature and that all impurities of action or passion do not form a real part of it.

The summum bonum of life is attained when all impurities are removed and the pure nature of the self is thoroughly and permanently apprehended.

Rabindra Nath Tagore roughly said that the 'body' represents the finite side of man's existence and 'soul' stands for the infinite aspects of man's nature". According to him body is *the temple of the Divine*. Tagore says, "Heaven is fulfilled in your sweet body, my child, in your palpitating heart"<sup>4</sup>.

According to Vivekananda, freedom represents the essence of the soul, and as such, soul is not really in bondage. The soul, he

says, performs actions in ignorance, certain tendencies and *Samskāras* are created in accordance with which the next birth is determined. Soul is immortal. The realisation of immortality of the soul has to grow-evolve, but nothing which is not already there can even be evolved. This is a fact of experience, having the testimony of science also behind it. The seed, e.g. grows into a tree only because the tree is already potentially contained in the seed. The soul is able to realise immortality because the soul is immortal.<sup>5</sup>

The word 'self' in western philosophy is used in three different senses. First, it is used in the sense of the permanent spiritual substance which lies behind and beyond the fleeting mental phenomena.

Secondly, it is used in the sense of an aggregate of mental states without any underlying principle of unity among them.

Thirdly, it is used in the sense of concrete spiritual unity which is not above and beyond the mental phenomena, but realises in them without doing its unity and identity in them.

Among these three views the first view is named as 'soul-substance theory' of the self, the second is known as the 'empirical' conception of the self; and the third is known as the 'idealistic' view of the self.

The view is first propounded by Plato. Plato conceived the soul as a spiritual substance. Before Plato, the soul was conceived in Greek Philosophy as something material. According to Plato, thinking is the essential function of the soul: the soul is eternal and immortal. Aristotle also conceives soul as a spiritual substance. According to him, the soul is the '*entelechy*' of the body and body is its matter. Both Plato and Aristotle take the soul as the unity of manifold experiences of the individual.

This theory of the soul is called the traditional or 'soul-substance theory' of the self. It was modified later by Descartes, Locke and Berkeley.

Descartes conceived the 'soul' as a 'Spiritual' substance whose essential attribute is *thinking* or *consciousness*. From the consciousness of the 'self', he is led to affirm its existence. Descartes admits the intuitive knowledge of the self. He says, "I have an intuition of myself, so the existence of the self is unquestionable". His famous dictum '*Cogito ergo sum*' is the first principle of his philosophy. Locke advocates 'the soul substance' theory of the self. He also says that we have an intuitive certainty of the self.

According to Berkeley, the soul is entirely different from ideas or experiences which are sensuous in nature. The self is entirely different from ideas. Ideas cannot live, if there be no self.

The 'soul-substance theory' of the self is severely criticised by David Hume. Hume says that there is no reason for believing in the existence of a permanent spiritual substance. His analysis of experience gives no rational ground for believing in the existence of a soul-substance. Hume connects the various changing experiences with the Laws of association.

Hume says that when he enters most intimately into what people call 'self', he always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. The permanent conception of the self is nothing but a figment of our imagination.<sup>6</sup>

Kant was dissatisfied with both the 'spiritual-substance' theory and the empirical theory of the self. According to him, the self is an active organising agency and Kant's conception differs from the traditional theory of the self as a passive and changeless entity. Kant rightly grasps the nature of the self as an active unity, his theory of the noumenal self cannot be fully accepted. Kant's view of the self is the hint to the right solution of the problem yet we have to go beyond it. In Hegel we find a concrete view of the 'self' as a unity in and through the variety of experiences, and this is a more or less satisfactory theory of the self.

In this connection, we are in a position to understand thoroughly a much talked of dogma of Buddhism, the negation of soul.

It is not incorrect to say that Buddhism disaffirms the existence of soul, but this cannot be understood in a sense which would in any way give this thought a materialistic stamp. It might be said with equal propriety that Buddhism denies the existence of the body. The body, as well as the soul, exists only as a complex of manifold interconnected origination and decease; but neither body nor soul has existence as a self-contained substance, sustaining itself par se, sensations, perceptions and all those processes, which make up the inner life, crowd upon one another in motley variety; in the centre of this changing plurality stands consciousness (*Vijñāna*) which, if the body be compared to a state, may be spoken of as the ruler of this state. But consciousness is not essentially different from perceptions and sensations, the comings and goings of which it at the same time superintends and regulates.

It may be allowed in this place to go beyond the range of the sacred texts and here insert those very clear expressions which we find on this group of problems in a later and in many respects exceedingly remarkable dialogue, the "Questions of Milinda"<sup>7</sup>.

The soul is an aggregate of the body, the sensations and the ideas. All this is beautifully illustrated in the '*Milinda Pañha*'. Nāgasena

seems to have been an acute controversialist who loved argument for its own sake almost as much as Buddha disliked it. That he had caught the deeper spirit of the Master's teaching is, to say the least, improbable; but that his discourses present to us an interpretation of that teaching, which had gained currency in his day, can scarcely be doubted. The spiritual atmosphere of his age, the words, that he finds himself compelled to use, even his own subconscious convictions - are all against the thinker. In the well known chariot dialogue, Nāgasena is supposed to have proved conclusively that 'there is no Ego'. I cannot see that he has done this, and, I am by no means sure that he has attempted to do it. What he has proved is that, just as the name chariot belongs to the vehicle as a whole and not to any of its parts, so the name Nāgasena belongs to the living being as a whole and not to any of his organs or faculties. Independence of the thirty two parts of the body and the five *skandhas* there takes place this denomination, 'Nāgasena', this designation, this conceptual term, a current appellation and a mere name. In ultimate reality, however this person cannot be apprehended. If the dialogue is directed against anything, it is directed against the vulgar belief that the soul is quasi-material something which can be separated from the rest of the man, just as a wheel can be separated from the rest of the chariot; or again that the soul is one among many faculties which go to make up the whole man. The flame

simile, which is also supposed to be directed against the soul - theory of the Brahmanic philosophy is one which that theory, far from rejecting, would accept as singularly apt. For just as fire uses up fuel, and in doing so manifests itself as flame, (this is, as burning fuel) so the soul, in its journey through the earth-life, continually uses up physical matter, and in doing so manifests itself as a living body (that is, as physical matter fused and vitalised by the soul-fire) when the soul retires from the physical plane, the body, deprived of its vitalising influence, disintegrates, into dust, just as fuel, when its fire is extinct, turns to ashes; but the soul itself, continues to use up matter, though, as the matter used is now impalpable, the soul-flame becomes invisible till the time comes for it to feed again on the fuel of physical nature - in other words, to appear again on earth.<sup>8</sup> Even when Nāgasena's hostility to the Ego is unmistakable, his belief in re-incarnation causes his arguments to miscarry. He may flatter himself that he has disproved the identity between A (who is living now) and B (the future inheritor of his Karma); but as a believer in re-incarnation, he must needs take pains to prove that B will justly be held responsible for what A has done or left undone; and in his attempt to make good this point he has to admit that the relation between a "young girl" and the same girl "when grown up and marriageable".<sup>9</sup>

The conversation of the saint Nāgasena and the Greek king Menander truly reflects the old church door teaching.

This conception of 'soul' may be compared with the view of Heraklitos, who in his theory of being or beings more nearly approaches Buddha.

In the '*Questions of Milinda*' we seem to get a negative interpretation of the Buddha's teaching - the Buddha, who denies soul and a future for the liberated. There is no soul in the breath. The inhalations and exhalation are merely constituent powers of the bodily frame. Nāgasena satisfied Milinda, the king, with the saying of "It is by reason, O king, of the eye and of forms that sight arises, and those other conditions - contact, sensation, idea, thought, abstraction, sense of vitality, and attention - arise each simultaneously with its predecessor. And a similar succession of cause and effect arises when each of the other five organs of sense is brought into play. And so herein there is no such thing as soul."<sup>10</sup>

Nāgasena is a thorough going rationalist, who adopted the scientific method rigorously and tore off the screen of make-believe which pious hand had woven round the image of truth to disguise its uglier aspects. Realising that the seeker of truth must at least be truthful. To Nāgasena lack of evidence for an opinion was a sufficient reason for disbelieving anything.

For believing an incomplete evidence is not only a blunder but

a crime. In the west, in its love separate self-hood based on the misunderstood christian doctrine of an immortal soul, finds this Buddhist doctrine difficult. The Buddhist doctrine is not that of no-self or no-soul but of the separate soul. All things, without exception whatsoever are devoid of permanence and reality and in that sense illusion. In this sense there is no self and the belief in a self which has its rights and selfish interest is an illusion based on ignorance. When ignorance has been got rid of and knowledge has arisen, one does not grasp after sense-pleasure, speculative views rites, and customs, the theory of self.

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