
Understanding the Notion of Self in the light of Upanishads and Buddhist Philosophy

Santosh I. RautDepartment of Aesthetics and Philosophy,
The EFL University,
Hyderabad.**Abstract:**

Man's search for understanding self and the world around himself is as ancestral as his consciousness. An understanding of the self – whether it is real or fictional – influences the existence and the notion of self in human beings. The search for understanding self reached its zenith in Upanishads. The various aspects of selfhood and the relationship between selfhood and the universe as outlined in the principal Upanishads will be presented. How the Buddhist notion of self is distinct from the one found in Indian religions and philosophy will be discussed next. In considering the Buddhist view, the reasons and logic that the Buddhists give to deny the Upanishadic notion of permanent self and the dynamic notion of self in Buddhist thought will be presented.

Key words: *Upanishads, Nikayas, Atman, Anatman, Sharira, Purusa, self, skandhas, eternalism, nihilism, freedom.*

Self in Upanishads:

We can find the question of selfhood being dealt with in *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* in the form of a dialogue between King Janaka and sage Yagnavalkya. King Janaka asks "when the sun and the moon have set, and the fire has gone out, and there is not a sound - what is then the light by which man is served? The sage answers: "Atman, the self becomes his light; for it is by the light of the self that he sits down, goes out, works, and comes back home." The emperor again questions Yagnavalkya, but of the many principles within man, which is the Self? Yagnavalkya says that Atman "as the product of his own innermost Spirit, the Atman, and all the gods were its

products and he himself was created as the field of their activities and enjoyment.” The sage illustrates that selfhood is independent of natural forces like Sun, Moon, fire and sound, and acts as a guiding source in man. Further, the sage considers that all gods and the universe is the product of selfhood and created for the enjoyment of Atman.

In *Chandogya Upanishad*, the nature of selfhood is explained with the help of a simile. Svetaketu divides a fig as per his father's instructions and finds a seed in it and again divides it and finds nothing. His father tells him “Verily, my dear, that finest essence which you do not perceive ... from that finest essence this great sacred fig tree thus arises. Believe me . . . that which is the finest essence ... this whole world has that as itself. That is Atman. That art thou (tat twamasi) Svetaketu.” Here, the sage explains the origin of selfhood/Atman from nothingness. He alludes that as the essence of tree, which we cannot see in a seed, cannot be seen, so also the selfhood cannot be seen but operates through external bodies.

Svetaketu’s father, sage Uddalaka, gives another example to illustrate that the essence and reality behind the existence of man and universe is Atman (selfhood). He asks his son to put salt in a water pot and asks him to find the salt. Svetaketu cannot find the salt as it dissolves in the water. But he tastes the salt by drinking from the pot. He was told “That which is the finest essence - this whole world has that as its own fixed unchanging self. That is Reality. That is Atman. That art thou, Svetaketu.” Thus in this Upanishad, selfhood is seen as the inner core of the universe which we cannot see but experience its manifestation in the existence of man and the universe.

Taittiriya Upanishad explains the origin of universe from selfhood/Atman as “from the atman, which is the Brahman, ether (*akasa*) is born; from it air; from air, fire; from fire, water; from water, earth. From earth are born plants and from plants food is derived; and from food man is born.” It distinguishes Atman/selfhood from Prana (life), consciousness(*chitta*), mind (*manas*),

reason(*buddhi*) and body(*sharira*) by saying that “Matter is not the atman of anything; and the ultimate atman is not the body of anything.” Thus the mind (*manas*) is regarded as being "higher than the senses; reason (*buddhi*) higher than the mind; cosmic reason higher than reason; the unmanifest (*avyakta*) is higher than cosmic reason and "Purusha" (*atman*) is higher than the unmanifest.” Here, the sage also opines that selfhood is the cause of the origin of the universe and distinguishes it from matter. He also demarcates the difference between selfhood and other aspects of psyche like mind, life, reason and that which is not even in existence (unmanifested).

Katha Upanishad considers selfhood or Atman as the driving force which resides in the human body but it is different from it and guides it through the functioning of sense organs. It illustrates by an example of chariot to make the point clear by saying that, “The self (*atman*) is the owner of the chariot; the body (*sarira*) is the chariot; intuitive discernment and awareness (*buddhi*) is the charioteer; the thinking function (*manas*) is the bridle; the sense forces (*indriya*) are the horses; and the objects or spheres of sense perception (*visaya*) are ranging - ground (*gocarna*) . The individual in whom the self , the sense forces , and the mind are joined is called eater or enjoyer (*bhokta*).” Here also we can see that the selfhood/Atman is differentiated from temporal as well as psychological realities like body, mind, awareness/reason and senses.

Isavasyopanishad defines Selfhood as One and the Only which resides in all the living beings and sustains all living creatures but which cannot be perceived by the sense organs as “The Self is one. Unmoving. It is faster than the mind. Having preceded the mind, It is beyond the reach of the senses. Ever steady, It outstrips all that run. By its mere presence, it enables the cosmic energy to sustain the activities of living (Prana) beings.”¹

¹*Isavasyopanishad*, Part 1, verse 4.

We can also find that the Selfhood is not limited to the living beings only and It encompasses inside and outside of all living beings as “It (Self) moves, and It moves not. It is far, and It is near. It is within all this and It is also outside all this.”²

The Selfhood/Atman explained in this Upanishad not only explains the unity of all living beings but also derives the universal ethical value of brotherhood of humanity with all living creatures in the world as “The wise man who perceives all beings as not distinct from his own Self at all, and his own Self as the Self of every being,-he does not, by virtue of that perception, hate anyone.” (Isavasyopanishad Part 1, verse 6)

It is proclaimed in this Upanishad that whoever realizes the unity of selfhood of all living beings on earth will never be hateful towards other living beings and will never be unhappy as “What delusion-what sorrow is there for the wise man who sees the unity of existence and perceives all beings as his own Self!” (Isavasyopanishad Part 1, verse 7)

Mandukya Upanishad categorizes Selfhood/Atman as having four states namely waking state which is denoted by Visvanara; second state as dream state which is denoted by Taijasa; third state as deep sleep which is denoted by Pragnya and the fourth state as indefinable state of peace which is denoted by Shushupti. It also made no distinction between Selfhood of man (Atman) and universal Selfhood (Brahman) as “sarvaṁ he etad brahma, ayamātmā brahma, so'yamātmācatus-pāt.(All this, verily, is Brahman. The Self is Brahman. This Self has four quarters.”³

The state of blissfulness and awareness of Self without outward perceptions in its fourth state of Selfhood is explained as “That is known as the fourth quarter: neither inward turned nor outward-turned consciousness, nor the two together; not an undifferentiated mass of consciousness; neither knowing, nor unknowing; invisible, ineffable, intangible, devoid of

²Isavasyopanishad Part 1, verse 5

³Mandukya Upanishad, verse 2

characteristics, inconceivable, indefinable, its sole essence being the consciousness of its own Self; the coming to rest of all relative existence; utterly quiet; peaceful; blissful: without a second: this is the Ātman, the Self; this is to be realized.” (Mandukya Upanishad verse 7)

In *Prashna Upanishad*, five technical terms denote the characteristics of Selfhood/soul/Atman. It also says that whoever realizes these attributes of the soul attains selfhood. “He attains the supreme Immutable itself, who realizes He is. That shadowless, bodiless, colourless, pure, indestructible Being. O amiable one, he again who realizes this, becomes all-knowing, and all. On this there is a Sruti verse in support.” (Prashna Upanishad, Verse 4.10) In this Upanishad, selfhood is defined as *Acchhayam* (shadowless) which means it is immaterial; *Ashariram* (bodiless) which means absence of all forms of being; *Alohitam* (devoid of redness) which means devoid of redness or without the attributes of life energies like redness of blood etc; *Shubram* (pure) which means there are no attributes to Selfhood which is considered as impure and *Aksharam* (indestructible or unchangeable) which means Self is eternal without birth or death, youth or old age. Thus it states that whoever knows the shadowless, bodiless, pure and indestructible nature of Selfhood will attain such pure selfhood.

Katho Upanishad adds another dimension to the definition of selfhood which later gave birth to the Mayavada or illusion of world and reality. It not only states that Atman/selfhood as eternal without birth or death but also states that It does not create anything as “The intelligent Atman is not born, nor does He die. He did not spring from anything, and nothing sprang from him. This unborn, eternal, everlasting, ancient, is not slain even when the body is destroyed.” [Katho Upanishad I – II – 18] This definition of Atman is borrowed in Bhagavad Gita as “He is not born, nor does He ever die; after having been, He again ceases not to be; unborn, eternal, changeless and ancient, He is not killed when the body is killed.” [Bhagavad Gita Chapter 2 – Verse 20] Most of the attributes described in this Upanishad are also portrayed in Bhagavad Gita

as “If the slayer thinks “I slay,” and if the slain thinks, “I am slain,” then both of them do not know well. This slays not nor is This slain.” [Katho Upanishad I – II – 19]

Another interesting fact is that this is the first and only Upanishad which states that the soul/Atman/selfhood resides in the cavity of the heart of every living being apart from describing it as the smallest and the greatest of all things as “The Atman that is subtler than the subtlest, and greater than the greatest, is seated in the cavity of heart of each living being. He, who is free from willing and wishing, with his mind and senses composed, beholds the majesty of the Self and becomes free from sorrow. [Katho Upanishad I – II – 20]

It implies that by knowing self one knows God as Atman which comprehends everything without going anywhere as “Sitting he travels far ; lying he goes everywhere, who else, therefore, save myself is able to comprehend God, who rejoices and rejoices not?” [Katho Upanishad I – II – 21]

Further, this Upanishad clarifies that this Atman/selfhood is revealed to those who contemplates on Atman alone but not to those who are well acquainted with Vedas or Shrutis etc., as “This Atman cannot be attained by the study of Vedas nor by intelligence, not by much hearing(Shruti). It is gained by him who chooses (prays to) this (Atman) alone. To him this Atman reveals Its true nature. [Katho Upanishad I – II – 23]

Kena Upanishad states selfhood/Atman as Tadvanam (which deserves to be worshiped as the one Atman of all living things) and asks the devotees to pray in the name of Tadvanam as:

“That (Brahman) is well-known as ‘Tadvanam’;

The name ‘Tadvanam’ is to be worshiped;

“This is He” – knowing Him to be thus,

All human beings love Him extremely.”(Kena Upanishad Verse 4.6)

In this Upanishad the sage proclaims that whoever says he knows Atman does not know but whoever says he does not know, knows about Atman in poetical way as:

“He understands It who feels he knows It not;

And he understands It not who feels he knows It;

It is unknown to the master scholar;

But known to the one who admits he does not know.”(Kena Upanishad Verse 2.3)

The Student also echos the teachings of the sage as:

“I do not think that I know It well enough;

Not that I do not know; I know, and I do not know.

He amongst us who knows It, knows It only as such:

Not that I do not know; I know, and I do not know.”

(Kena Upanishad Verse 2.2)

Thus, it is clear from the study of Upanishads that selfhood is considered as non-material and eternal fixed essence of not only man but it is the originator of the universe and at the same time manifests as the universe. The selfhood is explained as neither inward turned nor outward-turned consciousness, nor the two together; nor an undifferentiated mass of consciousness; neither knowing, nor unknowing; invisible, ineffable, intangible, devoid of characteristics, inconceivable, indefinable, its sole essence being the consciousness of its own Self; the coming to rest of all relative existence; utterly quiet; peaceful; blissful: without a second. Upanishads consider selfhood as shadowless, bodiless, colourless, pure, indestructible being, unborn, eternal, everlasting, ancient, and it is not slain even when the body is destroyed. Further, all Upanishads categorically state that Selfhood cannot be known from studying Vedas.

Self in Buddhism:

Most of the systems of Indian Philosophy accept the existence of an eternal spiritual entity called atman, purusa, brahman or jiva. The materialist philosophy of Carvaka on the other hand strongly rejected the existence of a soul. Buddhism did not follow any of the prevalent trends but

followed the middle path. Buddhism was an exception, in denying the existence of an eternal soul, but at the same time it rejected the materialistic philosophy.

Narada discussed the concept of self in Buddhism as: “Apart from mind and matter, which constitute this so-called being, Buddhism does not assert the existence of an immortal soul, or an eternal ego, which man has obtained in a mysterious way from an equally mysterious source.”⁴

From the Buddhist point of view, man is regarded as a combination of five kinds of changing states – Panca skandhas. There is nothing beyond them. They are (a) form (*rupa*), (b) feeling (*vedana*), (c) perception (*sanjna*), (d) predispositions (*samskaras*) and (e) consciousness (*vijnana*). Buddha’s assertion was that a being was composed of the above five skandhas and therefore, *atman* (soul) cannot be identical with any one of these five or with all the five taken together. None of these alternatives are applicable to the soul. Therefore, the Buddhists say that there is no soul and believes in *anatman*.

In Buddhist literature, we can find Acharya Nagarjuna discussing *anatta* or no-self at length in chapter 18 of *Mulamadhyamakakarika* as: “If the self were to be identical with the aggregates, it will partake of uprising and ceasing. If it were to be different from the aggregates, it would have the characteristics of the non-aggregates.”⁵ Thus, Nagarjuna repudiates eternal selfhood and also the concept of selfhood as other than aggregates.

We can also find discussion of self in the book *The Debate of King Milinda* by Bhikkhu Pesala, chapter one on Soul and chapter two on Rebirth and concept of self is described as: “Just as it is

⁴Narada, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, The Corporate body of the Buddha Foundational Education, Taiwan, chapter 29, p 454

⁵Mark Siderits, and Shōryū Katsura (2013). *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā: Nāgārjuna’s Middle Way*. USA: Wisdom Publications, pp. 145-341.

by the existence of the various parts that the word “Chariot” is used, just so is it that when the aggregates of being are there we talk of a being”⁶.

It is well noted in the teachings of the Buddha that nature of self is non-substantial (anatta) and has no fixed nature rather it changes all the time *anitya*. We can find the relationship between impermanence, suffering and self as illustrated by the Buddha in *SamyuttaNikaya* as follows:

“The Buddha taught: All compounded things (*saṅkhāras*) are impermanent (*sabbesaṅkhārāniccā*). All compounded things are unsatisfactory (*sabbesaṅkhārādukkhā*). All states has no-self (*sabbedhammāanattā*). “Bhikkhus, what is impermanent is suffering, what is suffering is not-self.”⁷

Buddha distinguishes the concept of Anatta (no self) in his teachings from the eternalists and annihilationists in a dialogue with the wandering Vacchagotta. Vacchagotta asks Buddha in *SamyuttaNikaya* about selfhood as: “is there a self? And is there no self? He explained, after that, to the venerable Ananda as follows: “If, Ananda, when asked by the wanderer: ‘Is there a self?’. I had replied to him: ‘there is a self’, then, Ānanda that would be siding with those ascetics and Brahmins who are Eternalists”

“And if, Ananda, when I was asked by him: ‘Is there no self?’ I had answered, “There is no self that would have been siding with those ascetics and Brahmins who are Annihilationists.”

“If, Ananda, when I was asked by the wanderer Vacchagotta: ‘Is there a self?’ I had answered, ‘there is a self’, would this have been consistent on my part with the arising of the knowledge that all phenomena are nonself ?” “No, venerable sir.” “And if , when I was asked by him: ‘Is there no self?’ I had answered, ‘there is no self’, the wanderer Vacchagotta, already confused,

⁶Pesala Bhikkhu (1998). *The Milanda Panna: The Debate of King Milinda*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, chapter 1, p 34.

⁷Bodhi Bhikkhu (2000). *Samyutta Nikāya: The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*. USA: Wisdom Publication, p.869.

would have fallen into even greater confusion, thinking, ‘it seems that the self I formerly had does not exist now.’⁸

Buddha elaborates his doctrine of Anatta (no self) as “When there is a form, bhikkhus, by clinging to form, by adhering to form, such a view as this arises: ‘That which is the self is the world; having passed away, that I shall be- permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change...

“What do you think, bhikkhu, is form...consciousness permanent or impermanent?”

“Impermanent, venerable sir..”

“But without clinging to what is impermanent, suffering and subject to change, could such a view as that arise?”

“No, venerable sir.”⁹

In SamyuttaNikaya we can find the nature of Panca skandhas illustrated by Buddha as follows:

“The five aggregates are ‘of impermanent nature, of painful nature, of selfless nature’ (aniccadhamma, dukkhadhamma, anattadhamma).¹⁰

Buddha explains about the impermanence of Atman based on the basis of conditioned co-production or dependent arising: “When this exists, that comes to be. With the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be. With the cessation of this, that ceases.”¹¹

Buddha’s doctrine of no self (Anatta) is reconciled with the concept of rebirth of self in Milindapanha (Milinda’s questions) by Buddhist monk Nagasena as explained in his dialogue with the king. The king asks “He who is reborn, Nàgasena, is he the same person or another?”

“Neither the same nor another.”

⁸Bodhi Bhikkhu (2000). *Samyutta Nikāya: The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*. USA: Wisdom Publication, pp. 1393-1394.

⁹Bodhi Bhikkhu (2000). *Samyutta Nikāya: The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*. USA: Wisdom Publication, pp. 979-980.

¹⁰Bodhi Bhikkhu (2000). *Samyutta Nikāya: The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*. USA: Wisdom Publication, p. 44.

¹¹Bodhi Bhikkhu (2000). *Samyutta Nikāya: The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*. USA: Wisdom Publication, p. 517.

“Give me an illustration.”

“In the case of a pot of milk that turns first to curds, then to butter, then to ghee; it would not be right to say that the ghee, butter and curds were the same as the milk but they have come from that, so neither would it be right to say that they are something else.”¹²

In *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, we can find Buddha emphatically stating that the Panca skandhas are soulless (anattā) in the following manner: “Lord,” they replied. Thereupon the Exalted One spoke as follows: “The body (rūpa), O Bhikkhus, is soulless (anattā). If, O Bhikkhus, there were in this a soul then this body would not be subject to suffering. “Let this body be thus, let this body be not thus,” such possibilities would also exist. But insofar as this body is soulless, it is subject to suffering, and no possibility exists for (ordering): ‘Let this be so, let this be not so’.” In like manner feelings (vedanā), perceptions (saññā), mental states (samkhārā), and consciousness (viññāna), are soulless. (*Anattalakkhana Sutta*)

The Buddhist doctrine of rebirth should be differentiated from the theory of reincarnation which implies the transmigration of a soul. This point is made clear by Nagasena in *MilindaPannah* by giving multiple examples. King Milinda questions thus: “Venerable Nāgasena, does rebirth take place without anything transmigrating? “Yes, O King. rebirth takes place without anything transmigrating. “Give me an illustration, Venerable Sir. “Suppose, O King, a man were to light a light from light pray, would the one light have passed over to the other light? “Nay, indeed, Venerable Sir, “In exactly the same way, O King, does rebirth take place without anything transmigrating. “Give me another illustration. “Do you remember, O King, having learnt, when you were a boy, some verse or other from your teacher of poetry? “Yes, Venerable Sir. “Pray, O

¹²Pesala Bhikkhu (1998). *The Milanda Panna: The Debate of King Milinda*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, chapter 1, p. 43.

King, did the verse pass over to you from your teacher? “Nay, indeed, Venerable Sir. “In exactly the same way, O King, does rebirth take place without anything transmigrating.”¹³

AnguttaraNikaya categorically states that everything is soulless (Anatta) as a matter of fact and natural law as “Whether the Tathāgatas appear or not, O Bhikkhus, it remains a fact, an established principle, a natural law that all conditioned things are transient (anicca), sorrowful (dukkha) and that everything is soulless (anattā). This fact the Tathāgata realizes, understands and when He has realized and understood it, announces, teaches, proclaims, establishes, discloses, analyses, and makes it clear, that all conditioned things are transient, sorrowful, and that every-thing is soulless.” (AnguttaraNikāya Part 1)

Conclusion:

It is evident that the notion of selfhood in Buddhist philosophy is understood rather different from the one found in Upanishads; it is in fact a direct contrast with both eternalists and annihilationists views. The Buddha never accepted the notion of self in the light of either a nihilistic or eternalistic view in terms of fixed, unchanging. He taught that the self is a dynamic category and keeps evolving in each moment. It renews itself all the time and it would be mistaken to understand the self as if it is a fixed entity transforms from one body to the another without changing its character. It is striking to note that in Buddhist philosophy we find rebirth being explained without transmigration of soul even though it teaches soullessness. In other words, it is renovating because of the actions we perform and thus can't be a fixed. Buddhism radically introspects into the notion of self and questions its unchanging fixed existence.

Is there a Self as such? Concepts act as indicators to understand the true nature of self. Knowledge requires both intuitions and concepts, so knowledge of the self would also require both intuition and concept. Much of our knowledge arises from the interaction, experience, and

¹³Warren, H. C. (2005). *Buddhism in translations*. Cosimo, p. 234.

understanding the things in concept. Human beings, as thinking beings, always think in terms of concepts. Logical and conceptual understanding cannot be detached from the awareness of the self, which in turn, gives the information about the sort of the thing it is.

Understanding the 'self' is not at any extremity for example, in mere 'thinking' or in 'intuition', but self is an entity always open to renew itself. Self in this context can be understood out of the boundaries of any particularities. Self, is not fixed, rigid, limited, or 'Cultured', but something broader, universal, enlightened, unconditioned- Human-Self.

In Self thus, there lies the seeds of the transcendence to define itself in its own fashion. The self-realization, therefore, in terms of its full transcendence, leads the pure self-awareness. Self thus, within a given context and in response to the given context, may create certain set of values, and express its inner social experience that may set entirely a new individual and culture. It is *anitya* – in the process of change, and *anatta* – that carries no eternal fixed substance of any kind. In this sense evolution for the higher is possible; a human can be more than what s/he is, and can attain a state free from prejudices to attain a freedom forever.

Bibliography:

Primary Sources:

Bodhi Bhikkhu (2012). *AnguttaraNikāya: The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*. USA: Wisdom Publication.

Bodhi Bhikkhu (2000). *SamyuttaNikāya: The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*. USA: Wisdom Publication.

Chinmayananda, S. (2014). *Taittiriya Upanishad*. Central Chinmaya Mission Trust.

Fausboll, V (1881). *The Sutta Nipata: The Group of Discourses*. UK: Oxford Press.

Krishnananda, S. (1977). *The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. Discourse, 1, 24.

Mark Siderits, and Shōryū Katsura (2013). *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā: Nāgārjuna's Middle Way*. USA: Wisdom Publications.

Narada Thera (1993) *The Dhammapada: Pāli Text and Translation with Stories in Brief and Notes*. Taiwan: the Buddha Educational Foundation.

Nāṇamoli Bhikkhu (2011). *Visuddhimagga: The Path of Purification*. Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society

Pesala Bhikkhu (1998). *The Milanda Panna: The Debate of King Milinda*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Sarvananda S. (1943). *Isavasyopanishad*. Sri Ramakrishna Math.

Sarvananda S. (2022). *Katha Upanishad*. Sri Ramakrishna Math.

Sarvananda S. (1920). *Mundaka and Mandukya Upanishad*. Sri Ramakrishna Math.

Sarvananda S. (1922). *Prashna Upanishad*. Sri Ramakrishna Math.

Schreiner, P. (1991). *Chandogya-Upanishad*. Oxford Text Archive Core Collection.

Trenckner, V. (1888). *Majjhima-nikaya Vol. 1*. Pali Text Society, London.

Secondary Sources:

Chatterjee, S., & Datta, D. M. (1954). *An introduction to Indian philosophy* (p. 119). University of Calcutta.

Hiriyanna, M., & Hiriyanna, M. (1993). *Outlines of Indian philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass Publ..

Nārada, M., & Nārada. (1980). *The Buddha and his teachings*. Buddhist Research Society.

"Materialism as Viewed in Indian Philosophy." <http://www.smslucknow.com/pdf/sms.pdf>

Prevos, P. (2002). The Self in Indian Philosophy: Hindu, Buddhist and Carvaka views. *The Horizon of Reason*

Raju, P. T. (2013). *The philosophical traditions of India*. Routledge.

Sharma, C. (2000). *A critical survey of Indian philosophy*. Motilal Banarsidass Publ..

Warren, H. C. (2005). *Buddhism in translations*. Cosimo, Inc..