

THE NOTION OF SOUL IN EARLY BUDDHISM

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Abstract

In the history of Indian Philosophy, the concept of soul has been treated as one of the central issues. Eschewing Charvak and Buddhism, almost all the schools of Indian philosophy accept the existence of soul. This paper aims at explaining the notion of soul in Indian Philosophy at the beginning. The purpose of this paper is to give an exposition and revisit the notion of self in Early Buddhism. Early Buddhism analyses that soul is the amalgamation of five aggregates, or Pancha-skandhas and each of them is not the soul. This paper has been divided into three sections for the purpose of clarity. The first section deals with the view of soul in different system of Indian philosophy, Second section presents a thorough explanation of soul in early Buddhism. And the concluding and critical remarks are examined in the third section.

Keywords

Self, no-soul, Early Buddhism, Anatmavada, Atman.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 10.03.2024
Approved: 26.03.2024

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Article No.18

*RJPSS Oct.-Mar. 2024,
Vol. XLIX No. 1,
pp. 129-134*

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[https://doi.org/10.31995/
rjpss.2024.v49i01.018](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2024.v49i01.018)

I

The concept of soul is a fundamental problem in the history of Indian Philosophy. Eschewing the Charvak and Buddhism, almost all the schools of Indian philosophy accept the existence of soul. The idea of a soul has taken on many different forms in Indian thinking, including atman, manas, Jiva, atta, purusa, ahamkara, buddhi, mahat, and so on. Charvak regards, there is no soul but they believe that perception is the only source of knowledge. Soul is nothing but the living body with the qualities of consciousness. So, he refers conscious body as a soul. Charvak admit that the existence of consciousness is proved by perception. Consciousness does not exist as an independent reality. It is nothing more than a conscious living body. (Chaitanya visista deha Eva atma). This view of the Charvak called the theory of the Identity of soul and body. According to Jainism, Jiva is a soul; Jainas, on the other hand, acknowledge Jiva as a conscious substance. Consciousness is the essence of the soul. There can be no soul without consciousness. The self is a permanent substance. Soul is real, knower enjoyer and active agent and an eternal substance. The soul is both immutable and eternal. The body and the soul are one. They are apart from the body and mind and are immaterial, incorporeal, and formless.

The Nyaya holds that the self is an eternal being with thoughts, emotions, desires, aversions, volition, merits and demerits, and dispositions. After prakriti the other reality of Sankhya philosophy is Purusa or self. Purusa is self, subject and knower .It is neither the body nor the mind, neither ahamkara nor the intellect nor buddhi. It is a basis of all knowledge and is the supreme knower. It is observer, eternally free, impartial spectacular and peaceful .It is beyond space and time, beyond change and activity .It is self-luminous and self-proved. It is uncaused, eternal and all pervading. It is imperishable and distinct from the physical body.

The Vaisesika Philosophy refers to the idea of soul as Atman. The soul or Atman, is eternal and all pervading. It is apart from the physical body is imperishable. There are innumerable souls and each is independent, individual, eternal and all-pervading spiritual substance. The soul is treated just like an object. Consciousness is not the essence of the self. There is a plurality of souls. A distinction is made between the individual soul, which is many and the supreme soul which is God. The two are similar but not identical. The soul is regarded by mimamsa as something distinct from the body, the sense organs and buddhi. According to Prabhakara, self is non-intelligent, inactive and permanent substance. The soul is apprehended as the knower (Jnata) of objects. The self or soul has nine special qualities,cognition(buddhi), pleasure(Sukha), pain(dukha), desire(iccha), aversion (dvesa),effort(prayatna),merit(dharma),demerit(adharma) and impression(samskara)

which are produced but its conjunction with the mind which is the internal organ. The mimamsakas including prabhakar and kumarila adopt the theory of the plurality of souls. According to kumarila, the self is different from body, is eternal and omnipresent.

Proponent of Advaita Vedanta Shankara says that Atman and Brahman are one and the same. That means Atman is same as Brahman. It is pure consciousness. It is the self which is self-luminous and which is unqualified Absolute. It is beyond space, time and causality. It is non-spatial, non-temporal and non-causal. It is non-empirical or transcendental consciousness. Sankara holds that individual self (Jiva) to be non-different from Brahman. But Ramanuja holds that the Jiva is as real as Brahman. The soul is also a part of Brahman. Ramanuja holds that the jiva is a consciousness as well as a conscious subject. The soul is not only the knower but also the agent and enjoyer. Ramanuja mentions three classes of Jivas; eternally liberated (nitya-mukta), the liberated (mukta) and the bound (baddha).

II

It is commonly believed that in man there is a permanent and abiding substances called soul or self (atma), which persists through all the changes in the body and the mind, and which exists before birth and continues after death, and migrates from one body to another body after death. But according to Buddha, nothing is permanent. The unchangeable law governing all existence is impermanence. Everything is becoming, change and flux. It is a phenomenon enduring a part less moment only and then passing away. Buddha also rejects the idea of a soul or self, in line with his dependent origination theory. There is a constant flow of ideas and thoughts as we gaze upon what we refer to as the "mind." Thoughts, feelings, desires etc., arise at one moment and vanish at the next, and this process continues perpetually. Our mental process like a stream is a continuous flux. The self is nothing but the sequence of subsequent mental and physical activities which are impermanent. There is no permanent self behind this stream. The self is a stream of cognition. Thus, Buddha advocates the doctrine of No-Soul (Anatma-vada or Nairatmaya-Vada). "The doctrine of No-Soul means two things: (1) The self is aggregate of impermanent mental and bodily processes; (2) The world is devoid of substances; it is unsubstantial and void; it is aggregate of impermanent qualities."¹

One may now ask, "How are we to explain a person's continuity through the various states of childhood, youth, and old age if there is no permanent soul?" The Buddha replies, "There is continuity of the stream of successive states that compose man's life, even though there is no permanent substance in man. Continuity

of becoming is simply another word for identity of objects. It is the succession that gives the appearance of an unbroken identity. We refer to something as the same old object or the same old man even though the composition of our souls and the substance of our bodies changes from moment to moment. The same way that a whirling, light stick appears to form a full circle, so too are we tricked into thinking that there is a permanent soul by the quick sequence of mental states. The continuity of life series is based on a causal connection running through the different states. It is comparable to the unceasing flow of water in a river or the unwavering flame in a candle or lamp. In a river, different water flows in a continuous manner and one quantity of water follows or succeeds another quantity of water. A single lamp flame is made up of several distinct flames in a similar manner. Continuity is created by the quick succession of flames in a lamp flame or the waters in a river. A river or a lamp flame in this continuity should not be regarded as a unity. Instead, think of a river as a continuous sequence of distinct waters flowing one after the other, just as a lamp flame is a continuous series of distinct flames. However, the unbroken succession of the several flames and the unceasing flow of water trick us into thinking that a river has the same flame and water. Like the waters in a river or the individual flames in a lamp flame, the life is changing in every moment.

Buddha believes in the law of karma and rebirth. Who will bear the consequences of actions in the hereafter if a permanent soul is rejected? In response, the Buddha states that rebirth is not the same as transmigration—that is, the movement of the same soul into a different body. The process by which one life leads to the next is called rebirth. Similar to how a flame can be ignited by another, even if they are unrelated, there is a causal connection between them; similarly, the end of one life can lead to the start of another. The characteristics of the present consciousness are inherited from earlier states, and the past permeates the present through its influence. Thus, memory becomes explicable in the absence of a soul. Buddha denies the existence of an eternal and invisible soul. Though he speaks of an empirical self. The empirical self is a collection of the body, mind and consciousness. It dissolves when this collection breaks up. The empirical self is an aggregate of five psychological groups or skandhas or Pancha-skanddhas (groups of changing elements). These skandhas are: form (*rupa*), feelings (*vedana*), includes perception (*samjna*), predisposition (*samskaras*) and consciousness (*vijnana*). *Vedana*, *samjna*, *samskara*, and *vijnana* skandhas are together called *nama*. Nagasena, a Buddhist teacher, brings out the nature of the soul by means of the parallel of the chariot. Just as a chariot is nothing but an aggregate of wheels, axle and the body, so the self is nothing but the name of the five aggregates of body, feelings, perceptions,

predispositions and consciousness. The five aggregates constitute the empirical individual. There is no eternal soul behind the collection of the five aggregates. Personal identity is an illusion. It is ignorance. The impermanent series of mental and bodily processes is mistaken for the permanent self.

The Buddhist theory of impermanent empirical self is slated in Hume's theory of the self. Like the Buddhists, Hume also reject the notion of a permanent soul. Like the Buddhists, Hume is an empiricist and believes that all mental processes are perceptions. He says: "All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call, impressions and ideas."² To him ideas are the "faint images of impressions in thinking and reasoning."³ Elsewhere Hume defines them as: "... all ideas are derived from impressions, and are nothing but copies and representations of them..."⁴. In Hume's opinion there is 'no impression of self and no idea of self'⁵ According to him , pleasure, pain, grief, joy etc. are like simple perceptions. The concept of a permanent and abiding self does not exist. Within a renowned and significant section of his writing, Hume says: "For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself. I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception..... I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement..... what we call mind is nothing but a heap or bundle of different perceptions united together by certain relations, and supposed, though falsely, to be endowed with a certain simplicity and identity"⁶ The illusion of personal identity is created by the quick succession of impressions and ideas. Like Hume, two well-known Buddha teachers, Buddhaghosa and Nagasena, reject the existence of the permanent soul as a substance. To them, it is just a set of five aggregates. Furthermore, Hume views the mind or self as a collection of ideas and impressions. Both Hume and Buddhists reject the notion of permanent soul.

III

Different schools of Indian Philosophy have severely criticized the no-soul theory of Buddha. They said that as upon accepting the no –soul theory, the concept of work becomes incompetent. Moreover, it leads to the refutation of causal principle because if reason is momentary then work cannot originate from it. Moreover the concept of Nirvana is also refuted upon accepting the principle. In support of momentariness, it becomes impossible to explain recognition. According to Nyaya Philosophy, memory is a part of the soul that has the quality of knowing. Because

the soul has knowledge of the past, present, and future and it is capable of remembering things. Sankara says that if an individual does not exist, then recognition and memory become unintelligible. Sankara believed that the durability and continuous identity of the person remembering is a prerequisite for memory. Every single event, person, thing, and thought of a specific life is experienced by one single person. One individual cannot remember the memories of others, but their own experiences. Thus there is a continuity of the experiencer. There is only one continuous experiencer, not many extending back in randomly assembled causal chain. Through memory issue, Sankara confirmed a continuous existence of self. It can be concluded that the theory of no-soul in the context of early Buddhism cannot be sustained because of the above mentioned reasons relating to problem of memory and the attainment of liberation.

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