

The Problem of Personal Identity Depicted in Buddhist Ethics

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Buddhism is empirical philosophy; therefore, Buddha always preached his doctrine in relation to the factual content. According to the Buddhism, metaphysical characters like, "there is omniscience God", "the soul is eternal" etc. are meaningless, because such propositions have no verifiable content. Many philosophies and religions that existed in India at the time of the Buddha revealed that there is a soul inside of the human body. The philosophical implication of the concept of the soul was developed by the Upanishad sages. Upanishad sages emphasized that the *Atman* (individual) is identical with *Brahman* (Universal soul). The individual who had realized the *Brahman* is the perfect one. The *Ātman* which is identical with the *Brahman* is not a thing that was born, and it is never die. As well as *Ātman* exists in the heart of every man in size of finger (*aṅguṣṭha mātro*).

The above *Ātman* concept was rejected by the Buddha owing its metaphysical nature. The rejection of the *Ātman* is very nature of the Buddhism; analytically and synthetically Buddha described that there is no such entity which is usually called as *Ātman* in the body of the beings. The analytical and the synthetically theories are explicit through the explanation of Aggregates (*khaṇḍa*),¹ Elements (*dhātu*)² and Faculties

(*ayatana*)³; they clearly show how the Buddha has described the non-existence of the *Ātman* in human body.

In accordance with the above analytical theory the Buddhism emphasizes that there is no eternal entity which is commonly called as *Ātman* in side of the human body. The human body or man (conventional / *sammuti*) is the combination of five aggregates (absolute / *paramatta*). “When all constituent parts are there, the designation cart is used, just so, where the five aggregates exist, of ‘living being do we speak’⁴. The constituent parts (five aggregates) are very momentary, change one situation to another within a second; therefore, Buddhism does not accept existence of the so called ‘person’ or ‘*Ātma*’ in the absolute context.

Roger William Farrington pointed out two ways of viewing the person or presenting personal identity in Buddhism as “weak notion” and “strong notion”. The weak notion is “analyzing the human subject in the term of process, so prompting the image of a “stream”, the constituents and activities of the subject are found to be unstable and transient and to give no basis for the postulate of permanent entity.”⁵ For him analysis and synthesis of one person into aggregates (*khandha*), element (*dhātu*), faculties (*ayatana*) and explanation the process of the constituents while repudiating the permanent entity of person known as weak notion. *Prima facie* it appeared that his argument of “weak notion” is due to the Buddha’s rejection of any permanent entity of person while explaining the Samsara process. The analysis of the person’s survival in the Samsara as a result of *kamma* is considered as “strong notion.” For him it is strengthened further by the concurrent emphasis given to *kamma*. This is the supposition that the fruit of the action will inevitable be born by the agent. Here, he presumes that this notion is strong, since

it represents an agent who brings *kamma* in Samsara. He further, emphasizes the strong notion was an inescapable simplification acceptable in ordinary speech or when talking to ordinary people. The weak notion by itself was the one truly Buddhist view, at least for practitioners. Roger William Farrington here tries to establish the personal identity in Buddhist ethics while highlighting and emphasizing the Buddhist theory of *kamma* and Samsara and he seems to be postulated the moral agent who brings good and bad *kamma* in Samsara. Does not this notion of Roger William Farrington on the other hand mean another type of eternal entity of the person which is somewhat similar with *Ātma* concept? Therefore, the problems of personal identity depicted in Buddhist ethics should be carefully studied through the analysis of the reasons why Buddha did not accept such eternal entity of the person.

The problem is, if there is no such person in Buddhism, to whom did Buddha has showed the moral path? At the same time, in this respect, the basic notions of Buddhist ethics, like, personal responsibility, personal identity and moral obligations etc. become meaningless as there is no person to follow them. Considering this matter of fact Gunapala Dharmasiri mentions “these issues originate from the nature of Buddhist theory of reality”⁶. This statement can be further described as follows. The reality in the Buddhist perspective means “see things as they are (*yathābhūta*). When the individual (who attained to *Arahat*) look at the world things as they are, he sees things (in conventional world) as nothing. Once, Buddha said to venerable Mogaraja to look upon the world as non-substantial (*suñño*).⁷ Thus, in absolute context, *Arahat* sees the world as freed form conventional concepts like, person, soul, animal etc. and freed form notions like

moral obligations, moral codes etc. The person who has realized nothingness of the conventional things transcends the conventional ethical notions; he is neutral on conventional concepts like good and bad (*dhammapi vo pahātabba pageva adhamma*). This does not mean that the person who attained the *Nibbana* is useless for the society; there are so many examples to show how Buddhist monks who attained *Nibbāna*, served for the well-being of the society. His actions are useful to the society but individually he does not need any ethical concepts to conduct his life as he is moral by nature (*sīlavā hoti na ca sīlamayo*)⁸. Thus, in Buddhist context, the conventional entities of the world dissolve in the state of the absolute. But the rejection of the person or *Atta* in absolute state does not make the meaningless of the Buddhist ethical codes. On the other hand, even though Buddhism has rejected the existence of the person in absolute context, it has accepted the existence of the person in the conventional context. That is the reason why Buddha has used the words like *Atta*⁹ puggala etc. to explain the conventional conditions. Buddhism agrees with that without conventional conditions it is impossible to realize or attain into absolute state. This is the reason why venerable Nagarjuna said, without convention, it impossible to realize absolute, same time without absolute it is impossible to realize *Nibbana*.¹¹ The language, concepts, conditions etc. essential facts of living ordinary life in conventional word. Without those conventional conditions it is impossible to exchange our day to day wants and all other necessities. So, ordinary world is a necessary fact for realization of *Nibbana*. In the ethical context ordinary person, when he is moral, is conditioned by morality (*sīlamayo*)¹², therefore to conduct his behavior, conventional moral conditions are required. But the person who has realized the absolute truth moral by nature, therefore to conduct his behavior does not require

conventional moral conditions. In this matter it is clear that Buddhism accepts the existence of the person in conventional context and accepts the validity of conventional ethical codes for well-being of the man and society. But in absolute state “the person” is combination of five aggregates as well as he is very momentary. The person who has realized this nature or absolute truth is freed from all conventional conditions like person, *Atta*, good and bad, merits and demerits etc.

The personal identity problem, as mentioned by Gunapala Dharmasiri, “easily solved if we were to accept the theory of a soul, but for the Buddha the idea of a self could not be meaningful in any way.”¹³ This statement inspires as to question, 1), why did Buddha reject the acceptance of the soul theory?, 2) Why could not self be meaningful in anyway? The answer for the second question as was mentioned by Gombrich is that “the central teaching of the Buddha were a response to the teaching of the old Upanishad.”¹⁴ Dr. Paul Horsch also holds same idea. For him “Buddha’s teaching was by way of reaction to a strand within the Upanishads and that this teaching was at least as much a criticism of other tradition.”¹⁵ Both these ideas presume, that sole purport of Buddha was to response to Upanishads teaching. Especially, these statements hint, Buddha’s target was to go against to the Upanishads idealism. However, the problem here is, how so far the above mentioned views are impartial? The authenticity of these notions will be known through the further clarifications on the question (1). The answer for the question number (1) includes in the question number (2) itself as follow “Buddha rejected acceptance of the concept of the soul owing to its metaphysical character to be unanswerable or there is no any verifiable content to make meaningful it in any way. As it was mentioned earlier that Buddha was an empirical

philosopher; he himself was known as empiricist who has well realized or understood *Dhamma* or nature (*sayameva dhammam abhiññāya*)¹⁶ in respect of empirical observation or personal experience and higher knowledge (*abhiññā*). He advised Kalama to accept things which are possible to verify through direct personal experience (*attanāva jāneyyata*)¹⁷. This is the most significant component of the Buddhist verification method. The personal experience or perception gained by oneself through the sense experience would be possible to believe without any doubt because one's own sense organs (stable sense organs) never deceive oneself. In the matter of soul theory, the problem is, the soul concept cannot be verified through the above personal verification method owing its inherent metaphysical character. Even though it (soul or person) is verified there cannot be seen anything other than five aggregates (*khandha*). Gunapala Dharmasiri mentions "the only way to make the idea of the self meaningful is to verify, and if we look at ourselves objective in order to verify it, all we see, is the five aggregates. And if we introspect and subjectively look for a self we see, is an ever changing series of thoughts and sensation."¹⁸ Thus, the eternal entity of the person or soul has no any factual content, since such metaphysical concepts transcend our empirical observations. When philosophers investigated the reality beyond the phenomenon world there arise philosophical problems. The *Atma* concept is a result of such an attempt which was formed by the language game. Wittgenstein pointed out important of careful use of the language to remove the metaphysical nature from the philosophy. A. J. Ayer said, "for we shall see that many metaphysical utterances are not due to the commission of the logical errors, rather than to a conscious desire on the part of their author to go beyond the limit of experience".¹⁹ Further, he said "for our object is

merely to show that philosophy as genuine branch of the knowledge must be distinguished from metaphysics."²⁰ Buddha also did same thing; He did not want to establish pseudo metaphysical characters in his doctrine, therefore He became very careful when He use the language without going beyond the limit of experience. That is the reason why some times he did not answer such metaphysical questions. For an example when *Vacca*²¹ asked whether the soul (*tathagata*=soul) exists or does not exist after the death, Buddha kept silence without answering to it because He did not want to make any metaphysical argument on the concept soul or person. Buddha realized that answering for those speculations could not find any factual answer rather than another metaphysical argument.

In addition to the above main reasons there are some other objectives of rejection of the concept of soul. These objectives can presume through the study of Pali canon. The repudiation of the *Ātma* in one context as mentioned by Roger William Farrington comes through the strong disparagement of the siding with speculation (*ditṭhi*). The strong attachment to the mere speculations create quarrels and disputes among the people,²² therefore, Buddha kept silence when such pseudo metaphysical questions asked him. On the other hand making pronouncement on such speculation, questioner would be misled as well as such answer would be siding with eternalism (*sassatavāda*) and nihilism (*uccedavāda*). Thus, with the purpose of circumvention from siding with speculation Buddha did not accept metaphysical concepts like *Ātma*. For Roger William another purpose of rejection the acceptance of *Atma* concept is repudiation of latent of the conceit (*mānānusaya*)²³ or ego-conceit (*asmimāna*) or personality belief (*sakkāyaditṭhi*).²⁴ The ego- conceit mostly arises due to

belief on *Atma* notion as well as Buddha said that every man has latent (*anusaya*) of personality belief.²⁵ Then again conceit (*māna*) is strong trait that remains until individual attain to the *Arahat*, therefore the belief on *Ātma* notion stimulates the ego conceit of the individual. This is another reason which can presume the reason for rejection of *Ātma* notion.

Another assumption made on the rejection of *Ātma* notion by Roger William Farrington is related with the expression of Gombrich “the Buddha’s riposte, as we find it expressed, is to point to the ubiquity of the other two *lakṣaṇāh* (unsatisfactoriness and impermanence) and to their incompatibility with such a notion of *Ātma*.”²⁶ According to this presumption Buddha rejected the speculation of *Ātma* to demonstrate non-existence characteristic nature of entity like *Ātma* with purpose of shedding light on two other *Lakkhana*. Better understanding of this he referred the characteristic in *Anattalakkhana sutta*.²⁷ Buddha’s sole purpose of rejection of *Atma* was not to shed light on or make clear the *Anicca* and *Dukkha*, because he did not want to make extra attempt to emphasize *Anatta* nature of *Anicca* and *Dukka* as they themselves include *Anatta*. *Anattalakkhana sutta*²⁸ clearly emphasizes the interdependency of three characteristics (*tilakkhana*) as “ what is impermanent is suffering, what is suffering is no soul”. Because of this interdependency of three characteristics, it unnecessary to specifically clarify one character to shed light on remains characters. However, Buddha has said all (*sabbe*) conditioned (*saṅkhata*) and unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*) things (*dhamma*) are nature of non-soul (*anatta*).²⁹ Here, Buddha emphasized non-existence of eternal entity like *Atma* in all the phenomena including *Nibbana*.

The above explanations are more than enough to understand, why Buddha has rejected the acceptance of the *Atma* theory; his sole purpose was not to response any targeted philosophy, therefore Gombrich opinion that Buddha’s target was to respond old Upanishad concept *Ātma* is not completely correct. Buddha rejected the *Atma* concept considering it metaphysical characters to be unverifiable. This is the basic reason why Buddha did not postulate eternal personal entity (*ātma*) in Buddhism.

End Notes

- 1 Feer, L. (ed.). (1975). *Saṃyuttanikāya (S)* vol. III, Pali Text Society (PTS), London.p.47, S.III.p.86, S.II.p.2, and Chalmer, R.(ed.). (1994). *Majjhimanikaya (M)* vol. III, Pali Text Society, London,p.102.
- 2 *S.IV. (PTS)*, p.524.
- 3 *M.I (PTS)*, p.107
- 4 *S.I.(PTS)*, P.246.
- 5 William Farrington. R.(2007). *The Identity Problem in Buddhist Ethics: An examination of Buddhist and Partition Conception of the Subject*, Birkbeck collage, University of Landon, pp.6,7,8
- 6 Dharmasiri, Gunapala. (1986). *Fundamental of Buddhist Ethics*, Buddhist research Society, Singapore,p.15
- 7 Andersen, D & Smith, H. (ed.). (1990). *Suttanipāta (Sn)* (PTS), verse 1123-1124)
- 8 Jayathilake, K.N.(1972). *Ethics in Buddhist perspective*, BPS, Kandy, p.26
- 9 *Dhammapada* (PTS). V
- 10 *A.I.(PTS)*, p.22
- 11 Vide, *Mulamadhyama Kārika*
- 12 Dharmasiri, Gunapala. (1986). p.18
- 13 *ibid* p 15
- 14 William Farrington. R.(2007). p.67
- 15 *Ibid*.p.68
- 16 *M.II.(PTS)*, P. 209
- 17 Morris, R.(ed.). (1995). *Aṅguttara-nikāya* I I (PTS), p.191

- 18 Dharmasiri, Gunapala. (1986). p.15
- 19 Ayer.A.J. (1960). *Language Truth and Logic*, Victor Gollancz, London, p. 13
- 20 Ibid.p.23
- 21 M.I (PTS), p.483
- 22 Sn.(PTS),168
- 23 M.I (PTS), p.483
- 24 Carpenter.J.E.(1992). *Dīghanikāya*, (PTS). p.254)
- 25 M.I (PTS), P.425
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 William Farrington. R. (2007). p.70
- 28 S.IV. (PTS)
- 29 Dhammapada. (PTS) verses.40