

Upaniṣadic Teachings and Ātma

The Vedic teaching of karmamārga or the way of ritualistic practices turned to a different direction which is called jñānamārga or path of knowledge that basically focused on mental cultivation than performing rituals. The first stage of this thinking can be found in the Brāhmaṇa and Āraṇyaka periods. As a result of this new trend, the faith in gods eventually lost and the gods became less important. The last period of Veda is called Vedānta which means end of Vedas and the philosophy they taught is known as Upaniṣad. The etymological meaning of Upaniṣad is to sit down close to the teacher or sitting down near the teacher (*Upa*: close by, *ni*: down, *ṣaḍ*: to sit). It means that the student should pay attention to the teacher being close to him so that the teacher can whisper to the student's ear. Upaniṣads basically deals with philosophical ideas such as Brahman and Ātman.

There are several hundreds of Upaniṣadic texts are mentioned in certain places but in general 108 Upaniṣads are given as the correct number. The *Īṣa Upaniṣad* is considered as the most important Upaniṣad among all. Out of 108 Upaniṣads certain texts are chronologically divided into four categories by scholars. The Brahadāraṇyaka and Chāndogya form the oldest group. The Īṣa and Kena come next and the Aitareya, Taitareya and Kauṣītakī come as the third category. The last category is consisting of the Kāṭha, Muṇḍaka, Śvetāśvara, Praśna, Maitrī, and Māṇḍukya. The other texts are considered as relatively later than the Upaniṣads mentioned above. The Upaniṣads are anonymous though some names of Upaniṣadic philosophers are found in texts and a list of names found at the end of the texts. Yājñavalkya, Uddālaka, Maitrī, Kauṣītakī, Aśvalāyana, Sanatkumāra, Nārada etc. are some of the names found in Upaniṣads.

As Upaniṣadic thinkers developed their insight instead of performing sacrifices and rituals, certain concepts such as the circle of life and death or *Samsāra* appeared as new views. Transmigration of ātma can be found in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* as follows.

But those in the village whose religious practice consists in (gaining) sacrificial merit, and alms-giving, they pass into the smoke, from here they pass into those parts of the process of time connected with darkness, the night, the time of the waning moon, and from there into the world of fathers; from there to the moon. That is king Soma – the food of gods. The gods eat that. Having lived there as long as there is a residue (of sacrificial merit), they return again by the same path to space, from space to the wind; having become wind, they become smoke... mist... cloud; having become cloud there is rain. They are here born as rice and barley (etc.); from here the escape is difficult: if only someone eats (them) as food and emits semen, can there be further. And so, those whose conduct here has been pleasant can expect to reach a pleasant womb – of a Brahmin, a Kṣatriya, or a Vaiśya. But those of stinking conduct can expect to reach a stinking womb – of a dog, a pig or an outcast.¹

¹ Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons – Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism*, p.52.

The idea of transmigration which originated in *Brāhmaṇa* and *Āraṇyaka* periods, was fully developed in the *Vedānta* period. This is completely a different idea from the *g Veda* because in the *g Veda* there was a primitive belief of next birth, either go to the *Pit Loka* or the House of Clay. Except sacrificing or performing rituals as one and only path to go to heaven, Upaniṣadic thinkers searched for another way to free from worldly bondages; that is the way of knowledge. As the result of this quest or intellectual approach a new thought arose which is came to be known as *Upaniṣad*.

The *Upaniṣad* thinkers put aside rites and rituals such as sacrifices and practised meditation while looking into oneself as the most important of all practices. However, still they believed in *Brahmā* but as a neutral name called *Brahman*. That is the truth or reality of the external world or macro cosmology. The neutral word is recognized as greater than masculine or feminine. Upaniṣadic thinkers were supposed to be thought as follows. “Is there any unity behind the universe? Is there one absolute truth behind all the phenomena around us? If there is this unity, what is the nature of it? What is the relation of this absolute to the individual self?”²

These sages were called Mun -s. The aforementioned Upaniṣad thinkers such as Yājñavalkya are such mun -s. *Mun -s* were not mere seekers of knowledge but they practised meditation which is known as *Yoga*. However, all the Upaniṣad thinkers were not brahmacāri practitioners. Yājñavalkya had two wives namely Maitreyī and Kātyāyanī and three sons namely Candrakānta, Mahāmegha and Vijaya. However, following the four stages of life Yājñavalkya renounced the world and entered the Brahmacariya life.

Some Upaniṣadic thinkers were cosmologists whereas some were psychologists. Some were interested in rebirth etc. The Upaniṣadic teachings cover various subjects such as physics, biology, psychology, religion, philosophy, mythology and astrology. However, they were very much interested in this physical body and transmigration of ātma from one body to another. As well as the universe our body is composed of five gross elements or five elements. They are: earth (bhūmi), water (āp), fire (agni), wind (vāyu) and space (ākāś). At the death of someone, organs and body parts will return to their respective components in the universe: the eye to the sun, the vital breath to the wind, the flesh to the earth, the fluids to the water, and thought to space. Upaniṣad philosophy is vast consisting of numerous teachings. However, there is a systematic treatise of Upaniṣad which is called Vedāntasūtra or Brahmasūtra composed by Bādarāyaṇa who said to be lived between 5th – 2nd century B.C. In the Vedāntasūtra, the Upaniṣadic teachings have been summarized into 550 aphorisms under four chapters.

Ātma

Viśwanath Prasad Varma gives his idea about the origin of the concept of Ātma as follows. “The problem of the soul or Ātma has been ever present since the beginnings human speculations”. He further says that according to the ancient Egyptians, man was not an individual unity but a compound consisting of the body and of several

² Kenneth K.S.Ch'en *Buddhism, The Light Of Asia*, p.4

immaterial parts called souls – the Ka, the Ba, the Sekhem, which continued to exist separately even after death. Sir Charles Eliot also holds a similar idea regarding the belief of Ātma of ancient Egyptians. He writes: “The ancient Egyptians who had great interest in problems of after- death believed that fate after death depended on actions of present existence”. According to the Ṛgveda, after one’s death ātma walks on the same path of the ancestors and enter a happy world in the eternal light, where they could meet their blood relations again.

The terms self and soul both are used as equivalent terms for the Sanskrit term Ātma. However, the etymology of Ātma or Ātman is doubtful. It has derived from the root ‘AN’, to breath. The original meaning, however, of ātman was certainly breadth. Another meaning is life (*ātmā*), whereas ‘*ātmanā viyukta*’ means to be dead, devoid of Ātma. In the Veda, there are some similar terms for Ātma such as Manas, Asu (breath), Prāṇa, Ātman. However, the term ātma became the most popular term among all. In Latin it is called – Ipse, and in Greek it is – Avros. In the Ṛgveda – ātma means wind. It is also said that Ātma is the breath of gods - *Ātmā devānām*. There is a statement in the Ṛgveda, which says that ‘let the eye go to the sun and the breath to the wind’ (*Sūryaṃ cakṣuṃ gacchatu vātaṃ ātma*). (See *Anthropological Religion by Max Muller, 1892*)

By looking into internal world within themselves instead of seeking the external world, Upaniṣad philosophers found something within. That is nothing but *Ātman*. It is as tiny as fingertip that which they called it *aṅguṣṭhamātra*. According to *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* *tman* resides in the heart (*esha ātmā antar hrdaye*). *Brahma* is cosmic principle and *Ātman* is microcosmic principle. Both are identical. All this universe is verily *Brahman* (*sarvaṃ khalu idaṃ brahma*). *Bṛhadāranyaka* says: ‘Truly the *Brahman* is this *Ātman*’ (*Ayaṃ ātmā brahmā*). Again *Chāndogya* says: ‘*tat tvam asi*’, you are that. And the *Bṛhadāranyaka* says: ‘*Ahaṃ brahmā asmi*’ I am *Brahman*. According these great statements (mahāvākyas) both *Brahman* and *Ātman* are identical. Therefore, *Ātman* is immortal. *Paramātmān* and *Jīvātman* are the same but appear differently as same as the only Sun and the Moon reflect in the water as many. Only body is subject to birth, disease, decay etc., but not the *Ātman*.

Brahman and *atman* co-exist side by side as the two great principles. Therefore, *brahman* and *atman* are identical or one thing and the merge of *brahman* and *atman* is called *Brahmātmāikyam*. This identity of *brahman* and *atman* is the key subject of Upaniṣadic philosophy. Human desire is like a cloud which covers the truth of sun. When the cloud is away the sun of cosmic consciousness becomes immortal. Desires cause us to continuous birth and death. If we gain *Ātma Jñāna* that is the end of our cycle of life and death and after that no more transmigration of *Ātman*. The acquisition of this realization is *mokṣa*.

Early Buddhist Critique on Ātmavāda (the Teaching of Self)

According to the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* the true status of ātma cannot be perceived or expressed. Therefore there is a double negation used by Yājñavalkya as a definition of the status of ātma thus. “*Neti neti ātmā*’ (not this not this ātma). No matter how much it was important for the Upaniṣad thinkers but the Buddha denied the concept of ātma and he taught about ‘anatta’ or ‘anātmā’ which is opposite of ‘ātma’ as his standpoint.

The concept of ātma had been rooted in India at the time of the Buddha. Therefore, even some disciples of the Buddha misunderstood the Buddha's position regarding ātma. Bikkhu S ti is one of His disciples who misunderstood the Buddha's teaching and held a view that the Buddha teaches about an unchanging consciousness. In later time, Pudgalavādins who were a group of monks misunderstood Buddha's teaching 'puggala' or 'pudgala'. The biggest controversial point found in "the Points of Controversy" is connected with Pudgalavādins.

Now we can refer to some teaching of the Buddha to discuss how the Buddha denied the theory of ātmavāda. The Buddha always emphasized that there is no ātma created by God or subject to divine creation. What He really taught is no-self, anatta or anātma, which is the opposite of atta or ātma. Advising monks, the Buddha said that: "Monks, everything is empty. There is nothing which can be taken as self or pertaining to self" (*suññamidaṃ bhikkhave attena vā attaniyena vā*). This teaching is very important regarding anātma theory or an tmav da of Buddhism because it emphasizes that everything is empty and devoid of a substantial entity or otherwise known as ātma.

Different religious people and philosophers strictly believe that there is ātma. Saccaka was one of the famous debaters who lived in the time of the Buddha. He was agitated and annoyed by hearing the word 'anatta' taught by the Buddha. Then he vowed himself to defeat the Buddha in a big debate. So he called for many Licchavīs and claimed that he would defeat the Buddha in a debate and shake His mind in a way that a strong man shakes and drags a sheep to and fro by seizing it with its long hair. So, many people accompanied him and went to the Buddha to see the great debate. Saccaka went to the Buddha like a fighting bull. When the debate was started, the Buddha asked Saccaka whether he believes in ātma or not believe in. Saccaka replied that he does believe in ātma. Then the Buddha rejected his view and showed that there is no ātma within the five aggregates. But Saccaka was reluctant to accept Buddha's view. However, finally he accepted the Buddha's view.

There are many other instances we can quote here for the standpoint of the Buddha. Once, the Buddha questioned his disciples whether the Five Aggregates, six sense organs and six external objects are permanent or impermanent. They answered: 'Venerable sir, they are impermanent'. Then the Buddha questioned again: if anything is impermanent, is it suffering or not suffering? Then the monks said: "it is suffering, Venerable sir.' Then the Buddha said: "If something is suffering, it's devoid of self". That is the conclusion of the Buddha. This discussion is a clear-cut example to show how the Buddha negates the theory of self.

Anatta theory is revolutionary and striking idea presented by the Buddha. Those who believed in the ātma were extremely disappointed about this teaching. Once a monk questioned the Buddha whether one who believes in ātma can bear the teaching of anātma or he torments hearing this teaching. Then the Buddha answered as follows: "The one who believes in ātma may suffer when he hears the teaching of anātma. He thinks: 'I will be annihilated, I will be destroyed, and I will be no more.' So he mourns, worries himself, laments, weeps, beats his breast, and becomes bewildered. Though it is an easy thing for Buddhism to negate the theory of ātma as a misconception or a mind projection,

but for theistic religions, it is the most difficult thing to do so because ‘self’ is one of the most important concepts in their beliefs. The reason is the soul or ātma is created by the God. Once we reject ātma, the idea of creator God is rejected as well.

As it is described in the Upaniṣads, the real nature of ātma cannot be explained through language. So they used a special negation to explain this indescribable status. There are double negations as follow: ‘Neti neti ātmā’. This is a kind of paradoxical language and the hidden meaning is that ‘ātma’ cannot be explained by language. They explained the true nature of ātma as follows: “The self is the omniscient lord. He does not die. He is neither the cause nor effect. This Ancient One is unborn, eternal, and imperishable; though the body be destroyed, he is not killed. If the Slayer thinks that he slays, if the slain thinks that he is slain... it doesn’t. It is soundless, formless, intangible, unchanging, tasteless, odorless, external, without beginning, without end, immutable, beyond nature, smaller than the smallest, greater than the greatest; the self forever dwells within the hearts of all. When a man is free from desire, his mind and senses purified, he beholds the glory of the self and is without sorrow.” (Khaṭhōpaniṣad)

Even though Hinduism teaches about self which is unchanging and permanent, the Buddha rejected this idea, and He taught that all conditioned and unconditioned dhammas are devoid of self. One of the popular teachings in the Dhammapada can be quoted here as an example.

‘Sabbe saṃkhārā aniccā
Sabbe saṃkhārā dukkhā
Sabbe dhammā anattā’

According to this teaching, all conditioned-dhammas are impermanent, all conditioned-dhammas are suffering and all **dhammas** (both conditioned and unconditioned) are devoid of self (anatta). Some people misinterpret this particular word ‘dhammā’ as conditioned dhammas, actually the Buddha has used the word “dhammā” referring to both unconditioned and unconditioned dhammas including nirvāṇa. The Buddha did not use the word “dhammā” for other two categories, but He has used the word “saṃkhārā” instead of dhammā. This special usage very clearly shows that even the nirvāṇa is devoid of self.

Another important teaching of Buddha regarding anatta is the classification of human experience, such as the Five Aggregates (khandhas), internal and external bases (āyatana) and elements (dhātūs). Here the Buddha classifies the human body into 5 khandhas, 12 āyatanas and 18 dhātūs and He categorically rejects the theory of self or ātma within any of them. Advising to Mogharāja, the Buddha taught him to give up the notion of self to look at the world as empty. “Mogharāja, look upon the world as empty and be mindful, uproot the view of self. Then, you may able to go to the state (nirvāṇa), which cannot be seen by the Māra”. Through this teaching to Mogharāja, the Buddha precisely explained to give up wrong the view of self in order to realize the truth. As long as one holds the view of self or attaches to the notion of self, enlightenment is impossible. Therefore, the Buddhist teaching does not support the view of ātma and it regards this concept of ātma is a misconception or a wrong believe, which has to be totally given up (anupādāna).