

The Concept of Self in Buddhism and Brahmanism: Some Remarks

*Andrej ULE**

Abstract

I contrast briefly the Buddhist concept of Self as a process and a conditional reality with the concept of the substantial metaphysical concept of Self in Brahmanism and Hinduism. I present the criticism of the Buddhist thinkers, such as Nāgārjuna, who criticize any idea of the metaphysical Self. They deny the idea of the Self as its own being or as a possessor of its mental acts. However, they do not reject all sense of Self; they allow a pure process of knowledge (first of all, Self-knowledge) without a fixed subject or “owner” of knowledge. This idea is in a deep accord with some Chan stories and paradoxes of the Self and knowledge.

Key words: Buddhism, Brahmanism, Self, Non-Self, Consciousness, Knowledge

Izveček

Na kratko soočim budistični pojem sebstva kot procesa in pogojene realnosti s substancialno metafizičnim pojmom sebstva v brahmanizmu in hinduizmu. Predstavim kritiko tega pojma pri budističnih mislecih, kot je Nāgārjuna, ki kritizirajo vsako zamisel metafizičnega sebstva; zavračajo idejo sebstva kot samostojne bitnosti ali kot posestnika duševnih aktov. Vendar ti kritiki ne zavračajo vsakega pomena sebstva; dopuščajo čisti proces spoznanja (predvsem samospoznanja) brez fiksnega subjekta ali »imetnika« znanja. Ta ideja se močno sklada z nekaterimi zgodbami v Chanu o sebstvu in spoznanju.

Ključne besede: budizem, brahmanizem, sebstvo, nesebstvo, zavest, spoznanje

* Andrej ULE, Professor, Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.
andrej.ule[at]guest.arnes.si



The Fundamental Opposition Regarding the Self

It is a well-known fact of the history of religion and philosophy that Brahmanism and Buddhism sharply disagree about the existence and nature of the Self, both about the mundane ego-consciousness and the transcendental-transcendent Self (pure consciousness). For the authors of the *Upaniṣads*, there exists the eternal Self-*ātman*, which is the internal absolute in conscious beings and is identical with the essence of all being—*brahman*. The famous assertion *Tat tvam asi* (“Thou Art This”), declares this thought in a short formula. “Thou” refers to the *ātman* in us and “This” refers to the *brahman*. The sentence thus says, “*ātman* is *brahman*”. The later Vedantist thinkers, especially Śaṅkara, understood this thought as the identity of the individual consciousness in a man and the cosmic consciousness. This identity exists on the transcendental level but does not exist on the phenomenal (empirical) level. However, the empirical ego (*aḥam*) or the empirical soul (*jīva*) has its relative existence. *Aḥam* exists in the life of an individual person and dies with the death of that person. *Jīva* is somewhat more real than *aḥam* because it transmigrates through many lives. A person’s empirical I and Self-consciousness are like the “mental projections” of *ātman* into an individual being.

According to the *Upaniṣads*, *ātman* is an imperishable, eternal being. It lives in the heart of man and is the perceiver, conceiver, and knower. Some *Upaniṣads* are even more “realistic” in their description of *ātman*: it has a shape like a man: in normal times it dwells in the heart, but sometimes it goes out of the body (for example in sleep or trance). When it returns to the body then it appears. At death it escapes from the body and continues to carry on an everlasting life of its own. However, it returns to a new body if the deceased man did not know its real eternal nature that is its identity with *brahman*. If a human being transcends their inborn ignorance about their own Self, then his *ātman* “stays” in its very nature. It stays as a pure being (*sat*), consciousness (*cit*), and bliss (*ānanda*). However, in some *Upaniṣads* the transcendence of *ātman* is stated clearly. The famous statement of *Chandogya Upaniṣad*: *Neti-neti* (It is neither this nor that) indicates that the idea of *ātman* was not metaphysically naive. Many sentences are only metaphors for something which we cannot properly express (De Smet 1974).

For Buddhists, there is no *ātman*, no eternal Self, that could accompany or exist behind the rebirth process of an individual consciousness. They deny all kinds of eternal beings or non-beings. Thus, the impression of a sharp conflict emerges, between Brahmanism or Hinduism on the one hand and Buddhism on the other. It is clear that because of the immense complexity of the self-concept in Buddhism I’ll give here only a sketch of this topic. I would like to stress some lesser-known similarities between the Buddhist and the Brahmanistic/Hindu concept of the

Self. There are many philosophical schools in Buddhism and Brahmanism/Hinduism whose ideas on the Self differ greatly. In what follows, I will focus primarily on two prominent philosophical schools in Buddhism and Brahmanism: Nāgārjuna's *Mādhyamika* and Śāṅkara's *Advaita-Vedānta*.

Buddhist Criticism of the Metaphysical Self

For Buddhists only processes exist, or better, subsist. Everything is impermanent; it causes and/or experiences suffering, and possesses no Self. These are the three characteristics of existence. As a result of understanding these three characteristics, we learn to develop renunciation, or detachment. Once we understand that existence is universally characterized by impermanence, suffering, and Non-Self, we eliminate our attachment to existence. Once we eliminate our attachment to existence, we reach the threshold of *nirvāṇa*. The whole cosmos of beings consists of a series of causes and effects without a beginning. Each being is conceived of as a momentary “sum” of different causes, and thus everything has only a conditional and relative existence (*pratīyasamutpāda*). In the case of humans, the Buddha speaks of the cyclical links between *avidyā* (primordial ignorance), volition, perception, the appearance of names and forms, touch and sensation, desire and comprehension, becoming, birth, pains, old age, and death. No factor of human existence is everlasting; it has its beginning and end. They necessarily produce *samsāra*, the empirical world and different kinds of *dubkha* (suffering). The phenomenon of *dubkha* indicates the impermanence and selflessness of all planes of existence. It is the result of our fundamental ignorance. Only by eradicating ignorance through meditative practice and the supportive help of the eight-fold way is it possible to transcend the fundamental ignorance and seemingly infinite chains of causes and effects. Strictly speaking, *no-one* will be free, and *no-one* will enter *nirvāṇa* because there is no person or Self who is bound or will be free. This thought was well expressed in the *Vissudhi Magga* (Path of Perfection):

For there is suffering, but none who suffers;
 Doing exists although there is no doer;
 Extinction is but no extinguished person;
 Although there is a path, there is no goer.
 (Buddhagosa, *Vissudhimagga* XVI, 90)

Buddha propounded the thesis of Non-Self (ssk. *anātman*, pali *annatā*). According to this thesis, the Self is merely an empty notion because every living being is a changeable and transitory complex of components that do not possess any

substance (Harvey 1995). This idea has played a central role in Buddhism in general, although it has been interpreted and elucidated in very different ways by various Buddhist schools.

We must distinguish between the transmigration and rebirth. The term rebirth is a more general notion and includes transmigration too. Rebirth (reincarnation) means only the transition of mental events from one life into another, but it does not necessarily presuppose a stable spiritual substance that would make the rebirth, but if it does, it is referred to as transmigration. Buddhism knows rebirth without transmigration, but Brahmanism and Hinduism know transmigration. At least in its early period, Buddhism defended the idea of successive “lightings” and “extinctions” of contingent conscious moments enmeshed in a net of karmic causes and effects (ibid.). Buddhism does not deny the impression of the continuity of consciousness in our lives and the impression of a relative continuity of the stream of consciousness through many successive lives. In later Buddhism, for example in some schools of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, something like a *phenomenal continuum* of individual consciousness tying together successive rebirths was accepted but even this continuum was understood as an illusion which disappears at the very “moment” when an enlightened being “enters” into *nirvana* (Choi 20011). In spite of the nonsubstantiality of individual consciousness and the “illusory” nature of the individual self in Buddhism, the individual was not conceived simply as nothing but as a phenomenal being which can act in phenomenal world: she can meditate, free herself from her karmic conditions, and eventually become enlightened.

Is it possible to understand this position without positing a certain “something” that stays the same throughout the rebirth process, or at least throughout one’s lifespan? This and similar questions have been a major bone of contention for Buddhist thinkers and they were never adequately solved—perhaps because they cannot be “solved” by a theory, but a vivid, yet ineffable meditative insight.

The Buddhist notion of the stream of consciousness can be compared to Wittgenstein’s notion of the continuity of a given language game without having something in common in all cases of its use. Wittgenstein compares this continuity with a cord. The strength of a cord does not always depend on there being a single strand which runs from end to end, it sometimes depends on the interrelationship between overlapping and criss-crossing fibers, none of which runs the entire length of the cord (Wittgenstein 1968, par. 67). The early Buddhist doctrine of rebirth may be viewed like this: there is no permanent unchanging *ātman* linking up successive lives with its continuous psychic fiber, but there is, nevertheless, continuity that is assured by over-lapping and criss-crossing fibers. Buddhists

sometimes use the metaphor of a flame in order to make this point, since the flame is ever changing yet continuous.

Early Buddhists used the concept of the stream of consciousness that has no cognitive subject. Consciousness (*viññāna*) is more-or-less passive, perishable, formless, momentary. It functions as a passive force of the life-continuum. It has no internal continuity, but the karmic impact causes the continuum of *viññāna*. It is interesting that in early Buddhism and in Zen too, there is little or no interest in rebirth. It is more important that there is the attachment to the existence that causes rebirth. The stream of consciousness is the same as the stream of becoming (*bhāvasota*). A similar question would be: “what contributes to the unity of consciousness of a given person?” Buddhists generally accept the idea of the five basic constituents of a person: form (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), idea and perception (*saññā*), formation (*samskāra*), and consciousness (*viññāna*). All these constituents are empty of their self-existence as they are made of constantly changing *dharmas* (phenomena). They are also completely interdependent. What binds them into an individual conscious being? Is it one of these factors or something outside them? Buddhists generally deny both possibilities whose unity consists only in the interconnections of its parts or “elements” (*skandhāḥ*). We have thus the common ideas of the unity of a being and of the process-continuity without a necessary binding element, force, condition, etc. At least the early Buddhist criticism of the idea of Self does not mean the denial this idea as such, but only the criticism of the metaphysical idea of the Self as some everlasting inner being in each conscious individual. They also deny the idea of the Self as a hidden or a private “owner” (cognizer, actor) of mental life and experience. However, they accept the idea of a person, or of an empirical mental being that temporarily and conditionally lives in a given form. Strictly speaking, only the term “person” unifies the complex of constituents of a human being into a unity.

Nāgārjuna, the famous founder of the dialectical *Mādhyamika* philosophy (the philosophy of the Middle way), was very radical in denying of the Self. His main work is the famous *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, *Stanzas on the Middle Way*.¹ Like the Buddha himself, he tried to show that the Self and the Non-Self are both void notions. We cannot say whether a Self exists or not. Nāgārjuna and his followers do not accept the Self as the “appropriation” of mental acts and as a pure being outside the person. However, they do not reject any sense of Self. They accept the pure process of knowledge (and Self-knowledge) without a fixed subject or “owner” of knowledge. The Self has to be different from the empirical factors of the person because these factors are his acts. The agent and its acts are necessarily different.

1 Abbreviated in “*Karika*”.

It is also impossible to distinguish the Self from the empirical constituents of the person (feeling, touch, perceiving, imagination, etc.) because in this case it would be without relation to anything other than itself. It follows that the Self cannot be “in” the factors of the personal existence, nor can these factors be “in” the Self. The factors cannot “possess” the Self nor can the Self possess the factors. The only rational idea of the Self then is the *reciprocally dependent existence* of the Self and the factors of personal existence, like agent and act: “Action depends upon the agent. The agent depends on action. One cannot see any way to establish them differently.” (Nāgārjuna 1995, VIII, 12)

This understanding may bring freedom from our “clinging” to phenomena, i.e. from *samsāra*. Nāgārjuna says this clearly at the end of the eight chapter of the *Karika*:

We must say that action depends upon the agent, and the agent depends upon the action. Agent and action cannot exist independently of each other.

From this negation of independently existing agents and actions, an understanding of clinging should arise. Through this analysis of action and agent all else should be comprehended. (ibid., VIII, 2, 3)

We cannot even say of an enlightened soul: “He is free of I-ing and mine-ing” because there is not any ‘he’ as an entity, substance, person, etc.” (ibid., XVIII, 2, 3).

Nāgārjuna concludes: “When views of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ are extinguished, whether with respect to the internal or external, the appropriator ceases. This having ceased, birth ceases.” (ibid., XVIII, 4)

This criticism denies personal mind, I, and Self as “appropriators” of their “own” mental or physical acts. From the fact that there are some mental acts, we conclude that there exists one whose they are. We cannot conclude more from that, namely, that there must be someone who exists prior to these mental acts, one who was the real appropriator of the mental acts. We cannot prove the existence of Self as a pure I that lies behind the empirical mental activity. Some European philosophers like Descartes later made this (false) move. Descartes believed the mental substance possesses all *cogitationes*. I thus believe the Buddhist criticism of Self to directly refute the very idea of the separate existence of persons, minds, or I’s, which are at a distance from their mental acts (i.e. perception) and acts, but it does not reject the indicative use of the words “self”, “I”, etc. when the individuals refer to themselves as actors, speakers, and “subjects” of psycho-physical states and processes.

Nāgārjuna's criticism of any substantial self does not mean that he negates any concept of the self, but that he leads us with his argumentation to the understanding of the voidness of self that is to the self which is inter-dependent regarding all phenomena's (*dharmas*).

Even if, according to Nāgārjuna, our freedom and acts are likewise “interdependent” (void) with other phenomena as our being, it is not only an illusion. Without freedom any hope for enlightenment would be only an illusion too. Nāgārjuna surely did not defend such a claim. It is perhaps wise to say so, as a Japanese Zen master answered to the question if Buddha is bound with his *karman*: Buddha is identical with his *karman* (or even better, he is not different to it) (Katz 1974, 26).

Buddha as a completely enlightened being does not have any *own karman* because he does not have any *own Self*: he can thus only be non-different to the total *karman* of all living beings. This view accords with the Mahayanistic view on bodhisattvas; they are living beings who do not want to “enter” into *nirvāṇa* without entering of other living beings into it. One can de-mythologize this view by understanding how insight into the non-substantiality of individual persons and their acts necessarily coincides with the expansion of the net of interdependencies between living beings which one takes responsibility for them.

Some Later Convergences

In spite of all the differences between Buddhism and Brahmanism-Hinduism and the Buddhist criticism of the idea of Self, later on Buddhism and Hinduism (especially after appearance of *Mahāyāna*) indicate some convergence. Some thinkers of *Advaita-Vedānta* and of *Mahāyāna Buddhism* came particularly close in regard to the concept of the Self. The *Mahāyāna* philosophers of the “Mind only” (or *Yogācāra*) philosophy developed the concept of a basic mind (consciousness) that coincides with reality. However, this coincidence stays negative. The basic mind and the essence of reality are without substantiality and Self. Both are two aspects of the voidness of everything (*śūnyatā*). They transcend both being and non-being. Similarly, for some Vedāntists, the Self is the spiritual consciousness that is essentially indescribable and inconceivable in human terms. The best “positive” description of it would be that it is the *sat-cit-ananda* (pure being-pure consciousness-pure bliss). This description is only metaphorical; it does not touch the very essence of *ātman*. Seen logically, it is a negative description: *sat* means rather *non-nothing* than being, *cit* means rather *not non-consciousness*, and *ānandā* means *not non-bliss*. We cannot say positively what constitutes the positive content of *ātman* and its identity with *brahman*. Similarly, we can say, the term “Self”

is a metaphorical term, and we must be careful not to confuse it with the concept of individual substance, soul, person, or even god.

Some *Māhāyāna* philosophers like Vasubandhu, the founder of the “Mind-only” philosophy, developed the concept of a pure consciousness (*vijñaptimātratā*) which is the very basis of all existence. Vasubandhu means that the pure consciousness cannot be grasped by the intellect because the intellect itself is non-existent. However, this statement does not mean that the pure consciousness is non-existent. Pure consciousness is undeniable because the very process of denial is based on the strength of a self-luminous and self-evident flow of consciousness. It is the only reality, and it can be directly realized by a spiritual experience which transcends the subject-object duality (Tripathi 1972, 333f). The non-discursive joint realization of the void nature of consciousness and of all kinds of objects of consciousness leads to *nirvāṇa*.

Vasubandhu denies the real existence of the world and defends its construction in the field of the basic stream of consciousness. A similar idea was given later by Śāṅkara, the leading philosopher of the non-dual *Vedānta*. Śāṅkara used a similar argument to “prove” the existence of the Self, which in some way also resembles the later argument of Descartes on *Cogito*:²

Just because it is the Self, it is not possible to doubt the Self. For one cannot establish the Self (by proof) in the case of anyone because in itself it is already known. The Self is not demonstrated by proof of itself. It brings into use all means of proof, such as perception and the like, in order to prove a thing that is not known. For the objects of the expression, like ether etc., need a proof because they are not assumed as known in and of themselves. The Self is the basis of the action of proving, and consequently it is evident before the action of proving. Since it is of this character, it is therefore impossible to deny it. For we can call into question something which comes to us (from outside), but not that which is our own being. (Deussen 1973, 127f)

It is obvious that there are close parallels between Śāṅkara’s and Vasubandhu’s arguments. It might be claimed that, at least for these two thinkers, the difference between the Buddhist theory of consciousness and the Vedantist theory of the Self is not as great as it is commonly supposed in the polemics between the Buddhist

2 Arguments of Vasubandhu and Śāṅkara present two cases of transcendental arguments that try to show some necessary conditions for the possibility of the existence of conscious (mental) acts and conscious (mental) phenomena. I wrote more about the transcendental arguments in Indian and European philosophy in Ule 2008.

rejections of the Self and its affirmation by the orthodox Indian philosophers. The difference is rather one of emphasis. Buddhist thinkers of the Mind-Only (*Yogācāra*) school provide in-depth and subtle analyses of the Mind. They present the pseudo-creative potentiality of the Mind in the constructing of phenomena. However, they do not accept substantialism. They deny the eternal substantiality of the Self and the crude opposition of the Absolute and of *maya* (cosmic illusion). Some Vedantist philosophers (as well as some other orthodox philosophers) emphasize the substantiality of the Self (the thesis “*ātman is brahman*”) and gravitate towards some kind of dualism between the Absolute and the phenomenal world (*samsāra*).

Vasubandhu’s and the Śāṅkara’s arguments are similar to Descartes’s *Cogito* but ultimately transcend it. It seems that Descartes stops his *Cogito* in a self-evidential, but transitory thought “I think”. From that he draws the conclusion (in line with the assumption that no material substance is present in the time of doubt) that the thinking subject is a thinking substance that is qualitatively different from a material (spatially extended) substance. However, the existence of me as a thinking substance is given only momentarily. Descartes needs God as a third kind of substance not only to coordinate the thinking substance and the material substance in a human being but also to provide for the continuous duration of the thinking substance (Descartes 1979, 50).

The important difference in the conception of pure consciousness by most *Yogācāra* philosophers and the metaphysical Self by non-dual Vedāntists is that pure consciousness is conceived as a pure flow of consciousness, and the metaphysical Self as an eternally present and non-intentional self-awareness.

Buddhist thinkers of the *Yogācāra* philosophy have analyzed the Mind with great subtlety. They have presented the pseudo-creative potentiality of the Mind in the construction of phenomena. In general, *Māhāyāna* Buddhism did not accept substantialism of the Self and the identity of the individual consciousness with the absolute Self. However, there have been some exceptions to this rule. The group of later *Māhāyāna sūtras* called *Tathāgathagarba* (*The Womb of Buddha*) developed the concept of the universal Buddha nature that is said to “reside” in all living beings and is the potential of their enlightenment. This universal Buddha nature takes on the form of the absolute Self, which seems similar to the Vedantic concept of the Self (*ātman*). The central *sūtra* of this school, the *Māhāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (2nd–3rd century CE) contains many positive claims regarding the Self that are attributed to Buddha himself. For example:

Common mortals and the ignorant may measure the size of their own self and say, “It is like the size of a thumb, like a mustard seed, or like

the size of a mote.” When the Tathagata speaks of Self, in no case are things thus. That is why he says: “All things have no Self.” Even though he has said that all phenomena (*dhārmās*) are devoid of the Self, it is not that they are completely/truly devoid of the Self. What is this Self? Any phenomenon (*dhārma*) that is true (*satya*), real (*tattva*), eternal (*nitya*), sovereign/ autonomous/ self-governing (*aisvarya*), and whose ground/ foundation is unchanging (*asraya-aviparinama*), is termed “the Self” (*ātman*). ... For the sake of beings, he (Tathagata) says “there is the Self in all things.” O you the four classes! Learn *Dhārma* thus! (*The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra* 1999, Ch. 3: 28)³

Buddha also gave advice to the monks (present at the time of his passing) that, in every situation, one must constantly meditate upon the idea (*samjñā*) of the Self which is said to be eternal, blissful, and pure. However it is questionable whether, in this particular *sūtra*, Buddha actually defends the idea of the Self as an independent reality. In the last chapter, Buddha provides a more precise characterization of the Self:

Nobly-born One, I have never taught that the six inner and outer *āyatana*s (sense-spheres) and the six consciousnesses’ are Eternal, Blissful, the Self, or Pure; but I do declare that the cessation of the six inner and outer *āyatana*s and the six consciousnesses arising from them is termed the Eternal. Because that is Eternal, it is the Self. Because there is Eternity and the Self, it is termed Blissful. Because it is Eternal, the Self and Blissful, it is termed Pure. (ibid., Ch. 43: 474)

The eternal Self is thus conceived as the “residual” term denoting the unspeakable Reality that “arises” when all *samsāric* components of our being “cease”, and not as the ideal or the absolute being given outside the phenomenal world. Here, the importance of Nāgārjuna’s criticism of the idea of independent Self is of special relevance. Nāgārjuna attacks the idea of the Self construed as a separate reality, as a separate entity occupying an autonomous ontological position in the structure of being. He criticized all concepts of an Absolute that would lay hidden behind the phenomenal world (*samsāra*). His criticism also hits implicitly the *Yogācāra* theory of the pure consciousness as the essence of reality and the idea of the

3 There exist many Chinese and Tibetan translations of this *sūtra* and only a part of its (possibly original) Sanskrit edition. They do not agree in all details but the quoted part is present in all variants of this *sūtra*. I quoted from the so-called “Northern” Chinese version of the *sūtra* made by the Indian monk Dharmakṣema around 421 CE and was translated in 1999 in English by the Japanese scholar Yamamoto.

world as an illusion in respect to the absolute identity. He presented a type of “non-standpoint” thinking which does not need some absolute besides the world, including *nirvāṇa*.⁴ For Nāgārjuna, the difference between the illusory world and emptiness or voidness is still a theoretical standpoint, and is a thesis that could be objected to. It thus still belongs to the realm of relative truths. It does not present the ineffable absolute truth that transcends all standpoints including a “thesis” of the illusory nature of the world and the “thesis” of the two truths itself. The ego-sense (the Self) does not exist as an independent reality, but is like a reflection of something else in the mirror of our mind. I believe it is the complex of the psychophysical constituents of a person that is reflected as the personal I in the person’s mind-stuff.

However, in spite of the Buddhist criticism of the metaphysical Self in Brahmanism at least Śaṅkara was quite cautious in regard to the idea of substantial Self and the idea of the Self as a “possessor” of its own mental acts. For Śaṅkara the Self is only the pure knower, or better, the witness of the mental activity, not the possessor of the mental activity. The Self is the necessary condition of possibility of all mental activity. The impression of appropriateness of mental activity to the mental subject belongs to the empirical I (*ahamkāra*) and to mental consciousness. The mental “ownership” of mental acts is illusory in respect to the Self. The Śaṅkara’s notion of ātman refers to the trans-personal truth of all persons, all mind(s).

Śaṅkara like some Buddhist philosophers accepts also the conditional difference between the lower (relative) and higher (absolute) truth (or between the lower and higher level of reality). This difference itself is a relative too, and can be transcended by the deepest mystical insight. In this insight the impression of the difference between the individual (personal) self and the Self vanishes. For most Buddhist philosophers the highest truth similarly transcends all differences between the Self and Non-Self, Being and Non-Being, Conditional and Unconditional. They do not tell what the absolute reality (*tathāgata*) is, thus they deny the idea of the absolute Self (or of any absolute being like *brahman*, God, Buddha, etc., too).

4 I will again pay attention to Wittgenstein, who developed a synthesis of the absolutism and its criticism which go beyond the limits of thought and language. The early Wittgenstein gave the first kind of this synthesis. The silence at the end of *Tractatus* expresses the limit of speaking and negates it. Wittgenstein has here still presupposed a common logical form of language and the world as a kind of absolute essence. The later Wittgenstein gave in his analysis of everyday language another term of this synthesis. He tried to develop the non-attachment to any fixed theoretical standpoint. He did not presuppose an essential correspondence of the language to the world. He was “not interested in constructing a building so much as in having a perspicuous view of the foundations of possible buildings” (Wittgenstein MS quoted in Hilmy 1987, 191). The unspeakable “correct view” at the end of *Tractatus* partly corresponds to the “perspicuous view” of our use of everyday language in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy.

For the higher, trans-conceptual level of the Vedāntist non-dualism the Self is not a separate, self-existent being next to or over the world because it transcends the very category of existence and not-existence. In this sense the usual concept of *māyā* in *Vedānta* is only a relative one. This is similarly to *Mādhyamika*. The Buddhist criticism of the Vedāntist concept of the Self and its transcendence regarding the world hit only the lower level of the Vedāntist knowledge. There is no dualism between the Self and the “illusionary” world. The seeming dualism between the transcendental Self and the phenomenal world must be transcended in a complete non-dualism of the spiritual reality that could not be expressed in words but in a mystical experience.

This does not hold true for all Vedantist thinkers. Śaṅkara, for instance, distinguishes between lower forms and higher forms of conceiving the *ātman* = *brahman* identity and its difference from *samsāra*. In the former case, the Self is presented as some kind of God or the absolute being that “magically” brings forth the phenomenal world. In the latter case, however, the highest conceptions of the Self (or *brahman*), e.g. “Being, Consciousness, and Bliss” (*sat-cit-ananda*), and the notion of the cosmic illusion (*māyā*) are only metaphorical in respect to the Truth.

It is worth to pointing out that both Śaṅkara and Nāgārjuna use the relationship of the face and its reflection in a mirror to show the illusory nature of the “I”. Nāgārjuna writes in *Ratnāvalī* (*Precious Garland*):

As the reflection of one’s own face is seen depending upon a mirror, but does not exist in its own right; so the “I” is experienced depending on the factors of personal image of one’s own face. As, in the absence of a mirror, one’s own face is not seen, so neither is the “I” in the absence of the factors of personal existence. From hearing this kind of statement the noble Ānanda attained the eye of truth and spoke continuously of it to the other monks. (Candrakīrti 1979, 168)

The idea of Self as a self-existent entity is thus (according to Nāgārjuna) the product of existential hypostazing of the perceived unity of a person, as a result of primal ignorance. Śaṅkara argues that the “I” is the appropriator of the mental functions, but the Self is the absolute Consciousness which reflects itself in the I:

The appropriator is the ego-sense which always stands in proximity to this (absolute Consciousness) and acquires a reflection of it... Only when there is a reflection (*ābhāsa*) of the inner Witness can words like “I”, “thou”, etc., by referring to the reflection, indirectly indicate the Witness. They cannot designate the latter directly in any way... Because the

ego-sense bears a reflection of the *ātman*, it is designated by words pertaining to the *Ātman*; just as words pertaining to fire are applied to torches and the like though only indirectly.

The reflection of a face is different from the face since it conforms to the mirror; and in turn the face is different from its reflection since it does not conform to the mirror. The reflection of the face while the *ātman* is comparable to the face and therefore different from its reflection. And yet ordinary knowledge fails to discriminate them. (*Upadeshasahasri* 18 by De Smet 1974, 70f).

Conclusion: Enlightenment without the Fixed Self or Non-Self

Buddhist and especially Nāgārjuna's criticism of the idea of self undermines any notion of the Self as a separate entity occupying an autonomous ontological position in the structure of being. This criticism is pertinent for some very important philosophical and religious ideas of the Self in Indian philosophy (for example, the *Sāṃkhya-Yoga* notion of the Self as *puruṣa*, or some theistic ideas of *ātman*), but not so much for the non-dualist Vedāntic notion of the Self like the Śāṅkara's notion. Śāṅkara's notion of the Self is not a personal self, it is the common transpersonal truth of all persons, all mind(s). It is also not a self-existent being (next to or above the world) because it transcends the very category of existence and not-existence. It is the Self and the Non-Self simultaneously but it is still something absolutely unconditioned. Nāgārjuna agrees that neither the existence nor the non-existence of the Self can be affirmed but he maintains that one should be free of I-ing and mine-ing (i.e. free from the possessive self) in order to free oneself from the cycle of personal rebirths. In his *Karika* he does not ascribe any fixed ontological status to either the Self or the Non-Self, and does not accept any unconditioned Absolute; for him, not even *nirvāṇa* is an Absolute over and above the cyclic existence (*samsāra*): "There is not the slightest difference between cyclic existence and *nirvāṇa*. There is not the slightest difference between *nirvāṇa* and cyclic existence." (Nāgārjuna 1995, XXV, 19)

The comparison with the use of the similar mirror-analogy by Nāgārjuna which was quoted before, shows that both thinkers compare a relative, conditioned "I" with the reflection of our face in the mirror. The ego-sense (or the Self by Nāgārjuna) does not exist; it is like a reflection of something else in the mirror of our mind. There is the true Self for Śāṅkara that resembles our face while for Nāgārjuna it is a bit unclear what would in this analogy resemble our face (in

the difference from the reflected “I”). I believe it is the complex of the psycho-physical constituents of a person that is reflected as the personal I in the mind-stuff of the person.

Nāgārjuna allows the pure process of knowledge (and self-knowledge) without a fixed subject or “owner” of knowledge that focuses itself on the interior “experience” of Emptiness and *nirvāṇa*. It seems paradoxical that there is knowledge without an act of knowledge and without subject. This idea is in a deep accord with some Chan stories and paradoxes on the Self and knowledge. Let me finish with a Zen stanza of Nansen:

Hearing, seeing, understanding, knowing—
Each of these is not separate.
For him, mountains and rivers
Do not appear in the mirror.
When the frosty heaven’s moon has set
And midnight nears
Whose shadow with mine
Will the clear pool reflect, cold? (Miura and Sasaki 1965, 59)

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