

# The Concept of Soul (Ātma) in Indian and Western Philosophy – A Review

Dipu Paul

State Aided College Teacher (SACT), Department of Philosophy, Nakshalbari College, Darjeeling, West Bengal, India, 734429.

## Abstract :

What is the soul ? Is there any thing called soul ? These are very controversial questions and these questions always spark debate in philosophy. Different sect or school of Indian philosophy in particular have sometimes agreed and sometimes disagreed about the soul (self). For example Carvakas and Buddhist do not believe in the existence of an eternal soul, but the other schools of Indian philosophy (like Nyaya-Vaisesika school) do believe in the existence of an eternal or permanent soul. In the Upanishads we also find the discussion of the soul (self). The Carvaka do not accept the existence of an eternal soul (self). What people means by soul is nothing but a conscious living body (caitanyavisita deha eva ātma). This conscious living body is composed of four elements (Ksiti, Ap, Tej, Marut). Even if the body is destroyed, the soul is not destroyed along with the body, rather the soul assumes a new body, such statements of the Nyaya philosophers were strongly criticized by the Carvakas. According to them, when the body is destroyed, the soul is also destroyed along with the body. Some Greek philosophers argued that, the soul (self) was the substance that gave life to the body. Christian theology, which believed in life after death, naturally adopted Plato's concept of the soul. But in the thirteenth century, Saint Thomas Aquinas attempted to create a modified Aristotelian concept to accommodate Christian doctrine. Aquinas argued that the soul (self) was indeed a form, but a special kind of form, which could exist temporarily apart from the body to which it was naturally connected. Aristotle focused on the soul as the essence of a person's being, especially through his intellect and powers of reason. German Philosopher Immanuel Kant concentrating on the transcendental ego, the organizing principle of experience that allows for the unity of consciousness. Plato believed in the existence of a soul or self that was separate from the physical body and could exist independently after death. The question is, does the soul really exist? Is everything over after death? This is a question of science too. Many scientists think, yes, there is a soul. Everything does not end after human death. The body dies, not consciousness.

**Keywords :** *Ātma (Soul), Ātmavādins, Brahman, Chetanā (Consciousness), Karma, Transcendental ego.*

## Introduction :

What is the soul ? Is there any thing called soul ? These are very controversial questions and these questions always spark debate in philosophy.

Whether there is any question in the minds of ordinary people about soul is a matter of discussion but the philosophical discussion about the soul is endless. there is no end to the debate about the soul in Indian and Western philosophy.

Different sect or school of Indian Philosophy in particular have sometimes agreed and sometimes disagreed about the soul (self). For example Carvakas and Buddhist do not believe in the existence of an eternal soul, but

the other schools of Indian Philosophy (like Nyaya-Vaisesika school) do believe in the existence of an eternal or permanent soul. In the Upanishads we also find the discussion of the soul (self).

### Concept of Self and No-Self :

Regarding this issue whether soul exist or not we find mainly two concepts in Philosophy, namely : Concept of Self (Ātmavādins) and No-Self (Nairātnavādins). The Charvaka School and Sunyavādins of the Buddhism belong to the second group and all other schools of Indian Philosophy belong to the first group. The Ātmavādins do believe in the permanent soul or eternal soul. They said that the self (soul) has neither creation nor destruction as it is permanent or eternal. Now the Sunyavādins of the Buddhism in order to counter the position of the Ātmavādins given an argument in the following way – “the soul is non-existent, as it is not created, like the Hare's horn”. According to the Sunyavādins of the Buddhism, nothing can be existent without being produced. The Hare's horn is not existent, as it is not produced. According to the Ātmavādins, soul (self) cannot be produced. If so then how will the soul exist ? Nyaya philosopher Udyatkara argues that the above argument raised by the Sunyavādins is not valid. That's why the non-existent of the soul cannot be established by this argument.

### In brief, the doctrine of various Indian Philosophical Schools about the Soul are as follows :

Vedanta school mainly focused on the knowledge of the self. There are differences of opinion among various philosophical schools regarding the soul. The Charvaka school is a materialist. According to Buddhism, the soul is temporary, it not permanent. According to Jaina Philosophy, 'soul is a single substance'. This substance is permanent, conscious, numerous in number and is equivalent to the body. According to Nyaya, the soul is a single substance, numerous in number and has a strange attribute called 'consciousness'. According to Mimamsaka, the soul is conscious, numerous in number and is the refuge of actions during life. According to Sankhya, the soul is numerous in number, is conscious, but not ananda. According to Vedanta school, the soul is one, unique, and is the form of true bliss.

### Concept of Soul (Ātma) in Indian Philosophy :

The Carvaka do not accept the existence of an eternal soul (self). What people means by soul is nothing but a conscious living body ( caitanyavisita deha eva ātma). This conscious living body is composed of four elements ( Ksiti, Ap, Tej, Marut). Even if the body is destroyed, the soul is not destroyed along with the body, rather the soul assumes a new body, such statements of the Nyaya philosophers were strongly criticized by the Carvakas. According to them, when the body is destroyed, the soul is also destroyed along with the body.

According to kathopanishad the individual soul (self) endowed with body, the senses and the mind is the enjoyer. It is said that, the mind is the bigger then the senses, the intellect is bigger then the mind and the soul soul(atmans) Is the superior to intellect. when the soul flee (from) the body, nothing leftover in the body . the soul is the knower (jnani), performer and enjoyer. Soul has no beginning and no end. The soul is eternal. According to Upanishad, the individual self (soul) in its pure condition attains Brahman and is totally free from the cycle of birth and death. The Individual self, called Jiva, is distinct from mind, intellect and senses. It binds due to its action. A living being ( jiva) is reborn according to his action or karma. The four stages of jiva are as follows – waking (jagrata), dreaming stage, dreamless sleeping stage, and turiya stage. In the awakened stage the individual soul (self) enjoys the objects of this world and this stage is called Visva. The individual soul (self) in this dreaming stage is called Taijasa. At this stage there is no external object of knowledge. It knows only the subtle inner objects and enjoys them through mind. The 3<sup>rd</sup> stage of the individual self is deep dreamless, called Susupti. Being in this stage, the jiva is called Prajana. The 4<sup>th</sup> stage of the individual sale is called Turiya stage, begin end

stage the jiva is known as Ataman ,this Ataman is neither conscious, nor unconscious. This soul( self) is known as Brahman.

It is worthy to note that the Nyaya School try to show that soul is different from our body. One such argument in Nyaya Sutra is “Sariradāhe Pātakabhavat”. In fact this argument is made from a moral standpoint. We know that if someone kills a person and burns his body, that person should be considered as a sinner (pātaka). According to the theory of karma he has to suffer the fruits of this karma. So he has to be punished in this life or in the next life. But if we agree with Buddhism and accept that the soul (self) is identical with our body, then this cannot be accounted for. Also if we accept the Buddhist view of the soul (self) as true, then the theory of karma cannot be explained.

The soul is a part of Brahman - according to the Upanishads. The judgment has also been accepted by Badarayana. The question may arise that since the soul is a part of pure Brahman, then what is the necessity of restrictions regarding its sins and virtues? (Badarayana was a staunch supporter of caste distinctions and untouchability, and his Vedanta is therefore incapable of teaching anything in this regard). That is why he has resolved that there is a necessity of restrictions regarding the body, just as the fire of the house of a Brahmin is acceptable, while the cremation ground is rejected. The soul is a part of Brahman, and at the same time it is also impure, so the enjoyment of one soul is not associated with that of another. Why not, every soul is different from each other. The soul is Brahman, although the body is considered to be an integral part of Brahman from the very beginning, Badarayana wants to keep a clear distinction between the soul and Brahman.

The Vedic sages call the soul a separate entity, which is distinct from the body. A mantra in the Rigveda states that the tree, the forest, the space, is sent to us from the Aditya. The sages of the Rigveda believed that there is an immortal world beyond this world where after death the great virtuous are summoned and enjoy eternal happiness and bliss, while the unrighteous sinners are placed in a most hellish city and which city is created by the gods. In the Rigveda, the mind and the soul are connected with the living entity's speech and especially the soul is connected with the life-breath or the body. The sages of the Vedic age were not familiar with reincarnation, perhaps no strong critic was born then who could say that this inequality of society - slavery-dominance, poverty-union, by which all but a handful are crushed in the throes of misery - is injustice. When this level of criticism arose, the religious leaders of the Upanishadic period also had to imagine rebirth - where social inequality returns to fulfill its full potential with its soul, for which the social masters and exploiters were questioned. No doubt the very clever Muktishka was invented to solve that inequality.

What has been said about the Rigveda applies to the Sama and Yajurveda as well. The description of the soul in the Katha Upanishad does not indicate whether there was a bias towards the oneness of the soul and Brahman (advaita). This theory of the soul being distinct from the body is explained in the following verse which was taken up exactly in the Bhagavad-gita:

“That wise man has no birth or death, he has not come from anywhere, he has not been anywhere. He is not born, immortal, ancient. Even if the body is destroyed, he is not destroyed.”

If the killer believes in killing, and the killed believes in being killed, then both are ignorant. He cannot be destroyed, and he does not destroy anyone.”

The Katha Upanishad attempts to explain the soul through the example of a chariot: "The soul is the charioteer, the body is the chariot. The senses are the horses, the mind is the rope, and the intellect is its charioteer." (Chapter 3, Verse 43, Bhagavad-gita)

## Controversy over the Soul (Ātma) :

In the history of Indian Philosophy, we find a critical controversy whether soul (ātma) is exist or not. Carvaka school do not believe in the existence of soul. But the other thinkers of Indian Philosophy do believe in the existence of soul (self). It is very important to note that the Naiyayikas generally take the Buddhists as their opponent. The Nyaya-Vaisesika school believe in the existence of the soul which is eternal, unchanging and different from our body. But this kind of soul (self) has been rejected by the Buddhist thinkers. The Buddhists do believe in their theory of momentaryness. Depending on this theory they said that each and everything of the world is momentary and so that everything is in notion. Hence there can be no soul which is unchanging and eternal. Buddhists believe in soul but that soul, according to them, is also changing like the other things of the world. Soul (self) according to them, is the aggregate of five skandhas (rupa, vedana, samjna, samskara, vijnana). So it is very clear that soul, according to this Buddhist school, are nothing but the sum total of our body, sense organs and mental states. The Naiyayikas have been raised different arguments to counter the Buddhist view and to establish their own view. One of the most important arguments forwarded by the Nyaya school is, 'darśanāsparsanābhyām ekārtha-grahanaṁ'. It is important to note that given by their argument the Nyaya School try to establish that soul (self) is something different from sense organs. Maharshi Gautama said that, soul (self) is different from the sense organs because a single object is captured by sight (vision) and touch. But Vatsyayana counter this view of Gautama.

## Concept of Soul (Self) in Western Philosophy :

Some Greek philosophers argued that, the soul (self) was the substance that gave life to the body. Rationalist philosopher Plato's thought of it as a separate entity from the body. A human being who living on the earth is made up of two parts - the body and the soul (self). The self (soul) is the essential part of the human being - what makes me who I am. The self (soul) is the crucial part that involves the mental life of the human being - it is the self (soul) that thinks, feels and chooses. The soul and the body interact. Physical states often cause the states of the soul, and the states of the soul often cause the states of the body. This view is called matter dualism. It usually includes the view that the soul is simple, that it has no parts. If there are parts of a substance, then one of those parts may have properties that the other parts do not. But for any experience I have, whether auditory or visual, or for any thought I have, it is entirely me. Plato also said that at death, the soul and body separate; the body decays while the soul goes on to live another life. According to Aristotle, the soul is simply a 'form', that is, as a way of behaving and thinking; to have a human soul (self) is to behave (by moving body parts) and think in certain human ways. For example a human being cannot be a good dancer without dancing, such as an embodied human being cannot have a way of behaving without behaving in that way. So that, according to Aristotle, the self (soul) does not exist without the body.

Christian theology, which believed in life after death, naturally adopted Plato's concept of the soul. But in the thirteenth century, Saint Thomas Aquinas attempted to create a modified Aristotelian concept to accommodate Christian doctrine. Aquinas argued that the soul (self) was indeed a form, but a special kind of form, which could exist temporarily apart from the body to which it was naturally connected. This view has always been difficult to express coherently, which makes it different from Plato's. Descartes reiterated Plato's view. In modern times, the view that human beings have a soul (self) has always been understood as the view that there is an necessary part of humans, which can be separated from the body, as depicted by Aquinas and Plato. The purely Aristotelian view has been more generally expressed as the view that humans do not have a soul; humans are simply made up of matter, although it can be constructed in more complex ways and has properties that inanimate objects do not have. Another way we can said that, Aristotelianism is a kind of materialism.



**In brief, the doctrines of various Western Philosophers about the Soul (Self) are as follows :**

**Aristotle:**

Aristotle focused on the soul as the essence of a person's being, especially through his intellect and powers of reason. Plato's theory of the soul shows us a tripartite structure with rational, vital, and appetitive parts, highlighting the individual's internal dialogue and potential conflicts.

**Stoic:**

Stoicism emphasized the importance of virtue, self-control, and living in harmony with nature, suggesting a view of the soul as capable of rational self-governance.

**Descartes:**

Famous for declaring "I think, therefore I am," which highlights the role of consciousness in defining the soul and separating the mind from the body.

**Augustine:** Sees man as containing both imperfect earthly and perfect immortal aspects, exploring the relationship between physical and spiritual beings(self).

**Plato:**

Plato believed in the existence of a soul or self that was separate from the physical body and could exist independently after death.

**Locke:**

He proposed a theory of personal identity based on consciousness and memory, which suggested that the soul is a continuous stream of thoughts and experiences.

**Hume:**

Hume rejected the idea of a fixed, unified self. According to David Hume, our experience is a continuous stream of perceptions and that the "self" is not a stable entity which challenges the idea of a unified, permanent soul. To Hume the soul is nothing but a collection of perceptions.

**Kant:**

German Philosopher Immanuel Kant introduced the concept of the transcendental ego, a unifying subject that organizes and gives meaning to our experiences, suggesting that the soul is an active agent in shaping our reality.

**Western concept of Soul :**

Rationalist Philosopher Plato's theory of soul in many ways influenced by the teachings of Socrates. Plato said that the soul exists after death and is capable of thinking .He believed that as bodies die, the soul is constantly reincarnated in subsequent bodies. Rationalist philosopher Plato's statement about the soul (self) is very close to that of the Nyaya view in Indian philosophy.

In the Republic Plato said that, Is there any function of the soul (self) that you could not accomplish with something else, for example taking care of something , ruling, deliberating and other such things? Could we correctly assign these things to anything besides the soul and say that they are characteristic (idia) off it?

No, to nothing else.

‘I can never catch my self ’ said by David Hume, ‘Whenever I try, I always stumble at some sense-impression or idea ’.

According to William James, ‘The so called “self” is only a stream of thought', ‘the passing thought itself is the thinker'. Most of the empiricists, sceptics and the pragmatists take the self (soul) as a mere bundle of ideas.

These are only few examples; many other Western Rationalist and Empiricist Philosophers have made crucial contributions to our understanding of the soul (self), each with their own new perspective. The concept of the soul (self) till now remains a central concept in philosophical inquiry, giving rise to ongoing debates and discussions about its nature and structure.

### **Scientific explanation about the concept of Soul :**

The question is, does the soul really exist? Is everything over after death? This is a question of science too. Many scientists think, yes, there is a soul. Everything does not end after human death. The body dies, not consciousness.

What is this consciousness? According to Penrose and Hameroff, it is quantum information. Information like computer data. But a little special. Which is a very complicated matter. But know that this information remains, it is not lost, no matter what the case. The entire universe retains its quantum information. In the same way, another scientist Robert Lanzer has the idea of biocentrism. Lanzer claims that space-time creates consciousness. It is not that we understand space-time with consciousness. Space-time is what it implies. That is why consciousness is body-neutral. Even after death, it remains in space-time. Lanzer's biocentrism also includes the idea of a multiverse or multiverse. In a multiverse, consciousness (Chetana) remains in a holistic way. Lanza's biocentrism claims that there is no destruction or creation of energy or power. There is only transformation of energy. According to him, the death of this self or this consciousness does not end when the body ends. It only undergoes transformation. We interpret our surroundings in the way our consciousness has interpreted them. Rabindranath Tagore beautifully said that, 'In the color of my consciousness, emerald is green and has become a ruby.' But Lanza also says that if consciousness is indestructible, then this space-time has created consciousness to understand it.

As a result, there is no death of consciousness. Consciousness is only retained in the body. When the body dies, consciousness merges with the Supreme Consciousness. This explanation is in religion, there is no contradiction in this explanation in science.

### **Conclusion :**

Is there really such a thing as a soul ? Is it possible for the soul to take on a new body after the death of the body ?

How can there be no conflict in the mind about the soul (ātma) as a student and teacher of Philosophy ? Whenever I think about the soul like Nyaya-Vaisesikas, that even if the body is destroyed, the soul does not perish because the soul is eternal and existent. At that very moment David Hume's opinion about the soul seems true again. Indeed, Hume rightly said that, the existence of an eternal soul is nothing but a strange fantasy. The soul is not visible. Whenever I become absorbed in my self, the existence of the eternal self is not perceptible except through the aggregates of thoughts (happiness – sadness, anger – love, etc.).

‘The soul is nothing but the conscious living body ’...the soul is destroyed along with the body ---these views of Carvaka are totally baseless ? It is very difficult to find out easy answers to these complex questions. Just as philosophers have different views on the soul, scientists and theologians also have different views. But no matter how many different opinions there are about the soul, there is no such thing as a soul, the soul is just an unreal

imagination... I don't think it can be said so easily. Therefore, the conflict over the existence of the soul (ātma) as it was before, still remains.

## References :

1. Jagadiswar Sanyal, GUIDE TO INDIAN PHILOSOPHY. Shribhumi Publishing House, Kamala Press.
2. Satischandra Chatterjee & Dhirendramohan Dutta, AN INTRODUCTION TO INDIAN PHILOSOPHY. Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd 2007.
3. Gobinda Charan Ghosh, BHARATIYA DARSHAN. Mitram.
4. Pradyot Kumar Mondal, BHARATIYA DARSHAN. Progressive Publishers, Kolkata -73.
5. DARSHAN -DIGDARSHAN [ DWITIO KHANDA ], Bengali translation of Rahula Sankrityayan's Hindi original Darshan – Digdarshan, Translated by : Chanda Chatterjee, Chirayata Prakashan Pvt. Ltd Kolkata.
6. Chandradhar Sharma, A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy. MOTILAL BANARSIDASS PUBLISHERS PVT. LTD, DELHI.
7. Y.MASIH, A Critical History of Western Philosophy. MOTILAL BANARSIDASS PUBLISHERS PVT. LTD, DELHI.
8. Dipak Kumar Bagchi, BHARATIYA DARSHAN. Pragatishil Prakashak, Kolkata -73.
9. A.S.THAKUR, A SHORT HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY. Mayoor Paperbacks, P-44.
10. Swapna Sarkar, PASHCHATIYA DARSHAN SAMIKDHA. Pragatishil Prakashak, Kolkata -73.
11. Dr. Samarendra Bhattacharya, Paschatya Darshaner Itihas. Book Syndicate (P) Ltd.
12. Dr.Kalyan Chandra Gupta & Bibhuti Bhushan Biswas, Paschatya Darshaner Itihas, Granthmitra.
13. M Hiriyanna (1993) , Outline of Indian Philosophy. Motilal Banarsidass Publication, New Delhi, India.
14. Max Mular, The Sacred Book of The East Vol.VIII ( Bhagavad Gita). Oxford at The Clarendon Press, London.
15. CD Sharma (1986), Buddha Darshan Aur Vedanta. Vision Bibhuti Publication, Allahabad, India.