
STUDIJE I ČLANCI

PERSONAL IDENTITY AND EASTERN THOUGHT

Abstract: This paper aims to show that the problem of personal identity is a fundamental question of the classical Indian thought. Usually we tend to think that personal identity is a Western philosophical subject, and so we tend to forget the significance of the Self (Atman) in Hinduism and even in Buddhism. The author shows how the Indian thought approached the question of personal identity and which was the singular solution outlined in the work consensually attributed to Gotama, the Buddha.

Key words: Personal Identity, Self, Buddhism, Hinduism, Atman, Buddha.

I

Personal identity is one of the most controversial issues in the contemporary philosophical thought. Briefly put, one can say there are two different, though complementary, questions at stake – one epistemological, the other metaphysical. The epistemological question, clearly articulated by Locke in his *Essay*, asks what is the necessary and sufficient criterion by which we can rightly state that we are the same person at different moments in time. The metaphysical question consists in determining one's fundamental nature, specifically when we ask ourselves, who we are. These questions complement one another in that when we wish to examine the concept of "person", and particularly our personal experience, it becomes impossible to dissociate it from inquiring into the reason why each of us considers himself or herself as being the same at different moments and different situations. In Locke's words, and I quote: "To find wherein *personal identity* consists, we must consider what *person* stands for; which, I think, is a thinking intelligent being that (...) can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places."¹

¹ Locke 1959: II, XXVII §9.

It is worth noticing that the main difficulties felt when dealing with the issue of personal identity are arguably derived from the subjective aspect associated with the experience of the Self. In fact, if it were possible to inquire the nature of “person” at the same manner we inquire the reality of any other entity, the metaphysical problem would be that we deal with in the course of identifying objects subject to the action of time. Now, this would not make it a lesser question, but it would certainly make it a different one.

An example: when we inquire into the identity of an artefact or natural object, we ultimately aim at capturing its specific identity, *i.e.* that which makes it the same at different temporal instances. The object in question would be inquired into, not from within itself, but from an external perspective able enough to capture a distinctive essence independently of the observer. As a matter of fact, this was the methodology followed in the Western culture when the question of the nature of “person” was first addressed. The definition of “person” given by Boethius – “individual substance of a rational nature”² – became thus paradigmatic. Whether or not it is a fortunate definition should not concern us now; the notion to retain is that ‘person’ is inquired just as any other entity.

Now, the reason why personal identity is a difficult issue is precisely due to the fact that the question can only make sense within a subjective context. And herein lies the explanatory reason to why the question of personal identity became second to the question of the soul. Whether there existed such a thing as a soul was felt as a question that could be addressed in the same level as other metaphysical questions, examples of which include knowing whether there exists a principle that created the world, or whether our values – be they ethical or aesthetical – have universal value. The soul, however, even when the inquiry concerned an individual soul, was thought of in neutral and objective terms, as nothing more than a substance, which competed with, or complemented, other substances. In other words, the soul could be referred to as being personal, but the perspective inquiring into it was neutral, detached and impersonal³.

² “Quocirca si persona in solis substantiis est atque in his rationabilibus substantiaque omnis natura est nec in universalibus sed in individuis constat, reperta personae est definitio: naturae rationabilis individua substantia.” (Boethius 1973: 84).

³ The only exception is Augustine: “Throughout Augustine’s corpus we find a striking appreciation for the philosophical importance of what each of us expresses

The perception of this problem is translated clearly in the work of the contemporary North–American philosopher Thomas Nagel when he calls our attention to the fact that we can have two radically distinct outlooks on “person”. “Given a complete description of the world from no particular point of view, including all the people in it, one of whom is Thomas Nagel, it seems on the one hand that something has been left out, something absolutely essential remains to be specified, namely which of them I am.”⁴ And he adds: “The conception of the world that seems to leave no room to me is a familiar one that people carry around with them most of the time. It is a conception of the world as simply existing, seen from no particular perspective, no privileged point of view – as simply there, and hence apprehensible from various points of view. This centerless world contains everybody, and it contains not only their bodies but their minds. So it includes TN, an individual born at certain time to certain parents, with a specific physical and mental history, who is at present thinking about metaphysics. It includes all the individuals in the world, and all their mental and physical properties. In fact it *is* the world, conceived from nowhere within it. But if it is supposed to be this world, there seems to be something about it that cannot be included in such a perspectiveless conception – the fact that one of those persons, TN, is the locus of my consciousness, the point of view from which I observe and act on the world.”⁵

The issue of personal identity is thus one of the most delicate; we inquire into the “feeling of the self”, which is to say, into the feeling associated to the experience each of us has about her/himself: into the experience of being *this* – not any *other* – being. Now, this seems to necessitate an act of self–consciousness, which, in turn, can only be conceived within a first–person perspective. For this reason, Stephane Ferret is led to consider the issue in the light of the famous

by saying or thinking, ‘I exist.’ Thus, for example in Book 2 of the dialogue *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine seeks to show how it can be made clear, and by ‘made clear’ he seems to mean ‘proved’, that God exists. But as his starting point for that ambitious project he asks his interlocutor in the dialogue, Evodius, whether he, Evodius, exists. ‘Or are you, perhaps, afraid’, he goes on, “that you are being deceived by my questioning?” Augustine adds, as if to reassure Evodius, ‘But if you did not exist, it would be impossible for you to be deceived’ (2.3.7.20).” (Matthews 2005: 3).

⁴ Nagel 1986: 54.

⁵ *Ibid.* 56.

§7 of the *Tractatus*. In his words: “Yet, there remains a question that unsettles and embarrasses us, placing us in an astonishing perplexity: ‘Why is it that I am the one who is I?’ And if I have not addressed that which is, on all counts, *the* question, such is because, as Wittgenstein put it: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”⁶

My aim here will be to show how the Indian thought approached this question and which was the singular solution outlined in the work consensually attributed to Gotama, the Buddha. I am convinced that this specific mediation will allow us to shed a new light on one of the most significant issues debated in Western contemporary thought and, by doing so, to lend a different voice to that which, as we just heard, seems to be condemned to silence.

II

Contrary to a commonly held opinion, the personal identity problem is a central question in the Eastern thought, particularly in the classical Indian thought. It is always difficult to accurately establish the temporal boundaries of a given historical-cultural period. That said, it seems to be safe to assume that, in global terms, the classical philosophy developed in the Indian subcontinent ranged from the 7th century BC (with the elaboration of the first *Upanishad*) to the 11th century of our era, notably, with the elaboration of the *Viśitādvaita Vedānta*, *i.e.* the system of “qualified non-dualism” by the philosopher Rāmānuja.

Running the obvious risk of oversimplifying matters, it would not be unreasonable to say that this period of intense speculative reflection was dominated by one question alone: what is the nature of the reality of the world around us, and which implications as to our personal destiny can one extract from the answer to that question? On the methodologies followed, this period witnesses the cultivation of several styles, ranging between decisively cryptic aphorisms, on the one extreme, and strictly rational logic treatises, on the other. The dif-

⁶ “A vrai dire, il est encore une question qui nous hante et qui nous met dans un embarras et une perplexité inouïe: ‘Pourquoi est-ce moi qui suis moi?’ Si je n’ai pas abordé ce qui serait, à bien des égards, la question, c’est que, comme dit Wittgenstein, ‘ce dont on ne peut parler, il faut le taire’ (*Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, 7).” (Ferret 1993: 20 n. 2).

ferent philosophical schools – typically called “*darśanas*”, *i.e.* “points of view” – also varied according to their lesser or fuller adherence to the religious principles observed in the Indian society of the time.

The main difference between these schools as a whole and the Western philosophical tradition lies in a concern – either more or less explicit – with soteriology. The ultimate nature of reality is inquired in that such inquiry can bring forth an answer to the main longings of human nature, and thus offer a framework as to how one should act. It thus seems to me that Jean-François Revel’s thesis is sound when he compares the Indian “*darśanas*” with the ancient Hellenic schools, pointing out the latter’s endeavour to interconnect metaphysical reflection with practical wisdom⁷.

The landmark of classical Indian philosophy consists in the elucidation of a concept designated by “*ātman*” – a word that, in most contexts, can be perfectly translated as Self. The term “*ātman*” is a Sanskrit word and given that Sanskrit is Indo-European language we can find equivalent words in Western languages – the German verb “*atmen*”, for instance, or the nouns “*der Atem*” and “*das Atmen*”, all of which typically refer the notion of breathing. This is, in fact, the common meaning of *atman* that we find in the first *Upanishads*⁸.

We frequently find the word “*ātman*” being used to express the notion of a living body, which reflects the idea that the ultimate criterion of life lies in a continuous flow of breathing. It should be noted that the body here intended could be mythically dimensioned as the “body of the world”, of which all beings are but its organic parts. *Ātman*’s more interesting meaning in the specific context of the *Upanishads* mentioned, is, however, that which results from its simultaneously reflexive and subjective aspect. The word “*ātman*” is originally a reflexive pronoun, masculine gender, which remotely stands for the act of “extending something” (**tan*), bearing the peculiar property of imparting a “corporeal personality (*tanū*) that individualises and subjectivises beings”⁹. This conjugation of reflexive pronoun and living body explains why what we are dealing with here is not just an *anima*, as in the Western classical culture; rather, what

⁷ Revel J.-F./Ricard, M. 1999: 24–25.

⁸ I speak here, of course, of the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad (BU) and of the Chāndogya Upanishad (CU) – two texts consensually acknowledged as pre-Buddhist. Cf. Olivelle 1998.

⁹ Rossi 2003: 68.

we face here is a concept that holds a personal aspect¹⁰, “*purua*” (person), which denotes a reflexive and experiential singularity present in each of us, even if, in some passages, it can be conceived as a “World Soul”. It should be pointed out that no contradiction ensues from this: one can refuse the notion of an individual soul – which, incidentally, is conveyed in Sanskrit by the word *jīva* – and, at the same time, assume that such a corporeal soul of the world is neither neutral nor impersonal. For reasons to be addressed later, the important thing is to never lose sight of the reflexive character of the word.

When we wish to convey the notion of reflexive action in a statement, we can use the word *ātman*. For example: the statement “she hurt herself” is rendered in Sanskrit as “*ātmānam sā hanti*”. *Ātman* is, clearly, a reflexive experience. In mythical-poetic terms, within the religious context of the Vedic hymns, the *ātman* – i.e., the Self – is the cosmogonic principle, which provides determination to that which, in the night of time, was undetermined. This latter dimension is expressed in one of the fundamental hymns of the Vedic cosmogony (*Rg Veda* X:129) – one of the oldest religious texts known to humanity. “In the beginning even nothingness was not, nor existence. There was no air then, nor the heavens beyond it. What covered it? Where was it? In whose keeping? (...) The One breathed windlessly and self-sustaining (...) At first there was only darkness wrapped by darkness (...) The sages who have searched their hearts with wisdom know that which is, is kin to that which is not. And they have stretched their cord across the void, and know what was above, and what below.” And the poem of creation ends with this fabulous adversative: “But, after all, who knows, and who can say whence it all came, and how creation happened? The gods themselves are later than creation so who knows truly whence it has arisen (...) Whence all creation had its origin, he, whether he fashioned it or whether he did not, he, who surveys it all from highest heaven, he knows – or maybe even he does not know.” This uncertainty, unique within religious thought, is not just the voice of a sceptic; it bears a metaphysical correlate in the mythological characterisation of the first principle as it itself being an interrogation.

In mythological terms, the secret name of the demiurge is the first consonant in the Sanskrit syllabary: “*ka*”. And “*ka*” means, lit-

¹⁰ BU 1.4.1.

erally, the question “who?”. It is easier to understand now the Self’s (or *ātman*’s) role in the determination of the inchoative principle of everything that exists. To the question of “who” (*ka*) performs any given action, the answer follows straightforwardly, in that when we ask ourselves “who breathes in the act of breathing?”, “who sees in the act of seeing?”, “who thinks in the act of thinking?”, “who lives in the act of living?”, the answer is invariably the same: the Self (*ātman*) does. And why? Because the Self is but the pure principle of reflexivity of that which, by nature, is undetermined and unsubstantial. Whence does the energy, or the force, that provides reflexivity to the original indetermination come? Here again, the Vedic texts do not equivocate: such creative energy is called *Brahman*. The entire Vedic–sacrificial culture of ancient India prior to the constitution of Hinduism, *i.e.*, prior to the “*santana dharma*” (“eternal law”), rests upon this notion; so much so that the priestly cast calls itself Brahmanic (*brāhmaṇa*), and one of the most common names to refer the demiurge is *Brahma* – a name in which the original *Brahman* naturally echoes.

The word “brahman” is a neuter noun. Its Indo–European root – *br̥h – is associated with the significations of force, growth, creative energy. Within this sacrificial tradition, it assumes a twofold meaning. On the one hand, it stands for the nourishment offered to the gods, which not only strengthens them as it also enables a continuous regeneration of the cosmos; on the other hand, it is the ritual word that assures the very effectiveness of the offering. This power of the word – common, as it is, to several mythologies – stems, at least in the Vedic speculative tradition, from the belief in the creative force of the sound vibration. All different gradations of being are nothing more than vibratory expressions, or vibratory variations, of one same sound – which clearly brings this metaphysical intuition closer to the well–known Orphic–Pythagorean speculations in Western philosophy. *Brahman* is the vibration, which unifies all beings – a signification thus close to the meaning conveyed by the neo–Platonic One. It unifies and structures, *i.e.* it imparts *dharma* (or “law”), *ṛta* (or “order”) to the entire cosmos; it does so in that it is an energy capable of mapping and determining the indeterminate principle – the absolute vacuum – by means of giving it reflexivity and experience of itself; in one word, by giving it Self.

The first *Upanishads* render an explicit examination of this poetic–cosmogonic notion and the thesis it introduces stands as one of the most original conceptions of speculative philosophy ever. Its starting point is well known and can be found in all *philosophia perennis*. If *brahman* is present in, and sustains, all forms without exception, then it itself cannot *prima facie* have any definite form. As Spinoza will analogously say, every determination of the infinite substance is, simultaneously, one *mode* of the substance and its *negation*. The negative path appears to be the only one opened to the human thought, in that the only way to glimpse at the absolute appears to be the extreme negation of all possible determinations. Up to this point, “there is nothing new under the sun”, to quote the *Ecclesiastes*’s well-known phrase. The novel aspect will be found in the following idea: given that every *objective* determination carries with it a negation of *brahman*’s own essence, why not look for the solution in our own *subjective* identity? After all, the determination of the inchoative and indeterminate principle – the *ka* – is selfhood, which manifests as Self (*ātman*). And, if this is the case, why not *identify brahman*, the creative and unifying energy, with *ātman*, the internal experience present in each and all of us? If *brahman* is present in every modality of being, then we can trivially conclude that it is present in our inner nature; the neuter mode of the Absolute – the “it” of *brahman* – can be seen as its most personal mode and vice-versa. Hence the persistent reiteration throughout the *Chāndogya Upanishad* of the most famous proposition of the Indian thought: “That is the Self. And that’s how you are”¹¹. It is, indeed, in this “that’s how you are” (*tat* [that] – *tvam* [you] – *asi* [are]) that the identity between *brahman* and *ātman* is decided; this is the declaration that sustains the fundamental principle of the most influential Indian philosophical school – known as Vedānta, precisely because it materialises the intuition expressed in the final texts of the Vedas: the *Upanishads* – and which will find in Shankara’s philosophy its most radical expression. “But, it may be asked, is *brahman* known or not known? (...) the existence of *brahman* is known on the ground of its being the Self of every one. For every one is conscious of the existence of his Self, never thinks ‘I am not’. And this Self is *brahman*.”¹²

¹¹ CU 6.8.7 and ff.

¹² Shankara 1962: 14.

It is widely accepted that the doctrine developed by Gotama, the Buddha, was part of the intense philosophical debate about the *Upanishads* that was ongoing in the late 6th century B.C.¹³. However, it is also undisputable that the philosophical inquiry on the nature of the Self (*ātman*; *atta* – também *attā* ou *attan* – in Pali) is one of the most controversial issues in the Buddhist doctrine. The disagreement in question concerned the meaning of personal identity within the primitive Buddhism. In order to illustrate this conflict of interpretations, I chose two paradigmatic statements as example. One was voiced by the Sinhalese master Walpola Rahula and can be found in his high-ranking book *What the Buddha Taught*; it says: “According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality, and it produces harmful thoughts of ‘me’ and ‘mine’”¹⁴. The opposing claim comes from the German Buddhist philosopher Georg Grimm; it says: “The Buddha has drawn this dividing line between *attā* and *anattā*, between I and not-I with great exactness. (...) He says: ‘What I *perceive* originating and perishing, that cannot be my I, my Ego;’ and *this* statement will certainly not be doubted by any thinking creature.”¹⁵

Contradictory theses seem to co-exist even within the religious practice. In his book *Selfless Persons*, Steven Collins, referring to the *Therāvada* school – a Buddhist school nowadays still dominant in countries as Burma/Myanmar, Thailand or Sri Lanka – tells us that “there is a radical refusal to speak of a self or permanent person”¹⁶. On the other hand, Roland Rech, former president of the *International Zen Association*, does not hesitate to emphasize the significance not only of the Self, but also of the “ego”. In his words: “[The ego] is the subject “I” of the first person. It is important that it forms itself, lest the subject be exposed to serious psychological problems,

¹³ Schumann 1982: 49ff.

¹⁴ Rahula 1959: 51.

¹⁵ “Der Buddho hat diesen Trennungsstrich zwischen *attā* und *anattā* – Ich und Nicht-Ich – ganz genau gezogen. (...) er sagt: ‘Wobei ich ein Entstehen und Vergehen wahrnehme, das kann nicht mein Selbst, mein Ich sein’ – und diesen Satz wird wohl kein denkendes Wesen in Zweifel ziehen.” Grimm 1976: 94–95.

¹⁶ Collins 1982: 78.

such as psychotic episodes or schizophrenia. (...) The ego is a dimension that needs to be accessed if one is to live as a human being. (...) The ego is not responsible for all our misfortunes; rather, it is a necessary stepping stone in achieving individuality, humanity.”¹⁷ The latter interpretation concurs with that of another great Zen master, Taishen Deshimaru, who says we should “know our true ego”¹⁸, also known as the “objective ego”¹⁹. Others attempt to differentiate the notions of “ego” and “Self”, trying to show that, when it comes to the three seals, or marks, of existence (*tilakkhandha*), namely, impermanence (*anicca*), “suffering” (*dukkha*) and “non-self” (*anattā*), Gotama, the Buddha, intends the third term as negating one of the two concepts – either the ego or the self – but never both simultaneously.

We are thus likely to find those who, like Christmas Humphreys (1969) and Caroline Rhys Davids (1914), believe that Siddhata Gotama never denied the notion of an eternal Self, but merely that of an individual ego or soul, and we are equally likely to find those for whom the *anattā* thesis is to be understood as negation of the Self, but not as negation of the “I”. Finally, we may also find those who follow the doctrine of the Indian Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna, who founded the significant Mādhyamika school in the 3rd century A.D.. According to Nāgārjuna, the Self is, in absolute but not in relative terms, devoid of essence, as is, in fact, everything that exists. This claim led some of his contemporary interpreters to favour “non-essence” over “non-self” as the accurate translation for *anattā*²⁰. The question at stake would then be not as much the negation of the experience of the self, as actually to show that the “feeling of the Self”, similarly to all other beings in the world (named “*dharmas*” in the primitive Buddhism), would be devoid of an autonomous and independent essence. This was, in fact, the meaning established by Nāgārjuna for the Buddhist theory of “emptiness”

¹⁷ “[L’ego] c’est le sujet ‘je’ de la première personne. Il est important que cet ego se constitue sinon le sujet encourt des graves problèmes psychiques tels les états psychotiques ou la schizophrénie. (...) L’ego est une dimension à laquelle il est nécessaire d’accéder pour vivre comme un sujet humain. (...) L’ego n’est pas responsable de tous nos maux, l’ego est un passage nécessaire pour l’accession à l’individualité, à l’humanité.” (Rech 1994: 109).

¹⁸ “(...) connaître votre véritable ego.” (Deshimaru 1984: 28).

¹⁹ “Ainsi l’ego objectif est le bon esprit.” (29).

²⁰ Garfield 1995: 89.

(*sūnyatā*), expressing the idea of a radical and infinite interdependence among all forms of being, to the extent that everything that is is *anattā*, i.e. devoid of an essence of their own.

Our purpose is here to contribute to this philosophical debate by attempting to clarify the meaning of Gotama's, the Buddha, doctrine on personal identity and experience of the Self. This purpose obviously requires that our first step is to examine how the founder of the Buddhism situates the concept of non-self. Being one of the core concepts of Buddha's thought, its elucidation is developed in several – and quite different – moments in the Canon. The crucial moment is the discourse known as “*Anattā Sutta*”. We know that we are before one of Buddhism's fundamental text because we find it in two different moments of the Pali Canon (*Vinaya Piṭaka* I 13–14; *Sutta Piṭaka – Samyutta Nikāya* 22:59). According to tradition, this text corresponds to the second sermon given by Gotama, the Buddha, right after the announcement of what is known as the “four noble truths” (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*), namely, the truths about “suffering”, its origin, its “cessation” and the “path to cessation”. In this new discourse, also delivered at the Deer Park, in the area of Vārānāsī (or Benares), Gotama, the Buddha, focus his analysis on the constitutive elements of personality, or, in a broader sense, of person. Let us consider some significant passages of this founding text of the Buddhist tradition, in which we will translate *attā* as Self.

“The Buddha addressed the group of five disciples: ‘Form is non-self. For if form were self, this form would not lead to suffering, and it would be possible to say: let my form be thus; let my form not be thus. (...) Feeling is non-self. For if feeling were self (...) it would be possible to say: let my feeling be thus; let my feeling not be thus. (...) Perception is non-self. For if perception were self (...) it would be possible to say: let my perception be thus; let my perception not be thus. (...) Emotions (volitional formations) are non-self. For if emotions were self (...) it would be possible to say: let my emotions be thus; let my feeling not be thus. (...) Consciousness is non-self. For if consciousness were self (...) it would be possible to say: let my consciousness be thus; let my consciousness not be thus. (...) Therefore any kind of form, feeling, perception, emotion, and consciousness, whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, should be seen as

it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘this is not mine, this I am not, this is not my Self.’

Gotama, the Buddha, ponders on our personal experience as beings in the world, asking himself what do we mean when we state the simple proposition “we are”. He reaches the conclusion that our experience comprises five fundamental attributes, all of which conditioned, impermanent and impersonal. Were it untrue, *i.e.*, if the different features of each individual’s personality were indeed *ours*, dependent on each of us, and if the Self resided in such features, then they would be able to assume the form, or the property, we wished them to assume – which is, obviously enough, not the case. The fundamental properties that constitute our existence, *i.e.*, the manner in which we manifest ourselves both to ourselves and to others, are not unconditioned attributes we ourselves possess; rather, and in Gotama’s exact words, they are “clusters”, or “bundles”, (*khandha*) of experience – which very nature is impermanent and evanescent. The experience of the Self that is given in the existence of a personality comprises five conditioned attributes, namely, corporeal form (*rūpa*), sensations (*vedanā*), perceptions (*saññā*), emotions (*sankhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāna*). These five clusters (*pañca khandha*) determine all the body and mental phenomena of our contingent and finite experience. The North–American Buddhist philosopher Robert Thurman gives us vivid images of each of the mentioned elements:

“We begin by looking at the body. We can (...) thump our chests and say, ‘I’m me’, but surely we are not just a bunch of ribs. We look in the mirror and say, ‘There I am’, but we say the same thing when we see old snapshots of ourselves (...) We can explore cells, axons, and dendrites; molecules, DNA, and RNA; atoms, subatomic quantum particles, unnameable forces and energies. Nowhere we can find anything still, static, independent. (...) We can move on to our minds and begin by sifting through our feelings, sensations, pleasures, pains, or numbnesses. (...) I investigate my sensory surfaces and, after some time, give up finding any stable, self-sufficient ‘I’ anywhere along them. Then we can move into images, words, symbols, ideas, concepts, mental pictures. This at first seems promising. ‘I’ is a word, after all. The names ‘Alice’, ‘Joe’, ‘Carol’, and ‘Shakyamuni’ all are nouns. When I pronounce my own name, ‘Bob’, does an image of myself arise in my mind? Is it a recent

snapshot of my face? (...) A *curriculum vitae*? A biography? Is it a favorite logo? A trademark? A symbol? (...) None touches the essence of 'me'. (...) We can move deeper into the motions of the mind, into emotions. When 'I' love or am in love, I feel powerfully present, even in the moment of feeling that solidity melting. When 'I' hate, I am carried away by destructive impulses (...) – all these energies seem to take hold of 'me', or seem to emanate from 'I'. But as I think them through, observe them in actuality or in memory, they seem fully bound in relationships. (...) At last we come to awareness itself, to look at our very consciousness (...) But to turn toward my center of awareness, I have to tell my awareness to turn back on itself"²¹. What we can say is that our personality is but the result of a combination of those five elements – to the point that the belief in its autonomy and permanence ends up being a suffering–causing illusion. In none of the mentioned clusters would we be able to detect the presence of an autonomous and unconditioned subject; therefore, the insistence in any of them will necessarily lead to suffering.

When we search for ourselves amidst the different conditioned factors of our personality, it would seem that we are bound to find a specific sensation, or a specific emotion, but never the Self. At first glance, Gotama's, the Buddha, position appears to be quite in synch with David Hume's thesis on personal identity: "When I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception."²² It is easy to understand why the Self could have been seen as an illusion – at best as a conventional name to refer the set of experiences we have on the world. However, a more careful analysis not only of the discourse on the non–self, but of other Buddhist sermons in the Pali Canon as well, shows us that this interpretation, albeit undoubtedly popular in the contemporary Buddhist community, is, I believe, hasty.

What the texts do show us is that Siddhattha Gotama was extremely careful not to hint at, let alone propose, a particular view on the nature of our own identity and of the Self (or *attā*). The *Ānanda Sutta* (*SN 44:10*) presents us with an interesting dialogue between

²¹ Thurman 1998: 74–79.

²² Hume 1972: 301–302.

the Buddha and the traveller Vacchagotta. The latter asks whether there is a Self (*ātman* ou *attā*), to which Gotama remains silent; Vacchagota then asks “Are you saying, Master Gotama, that there is no Self?”, to which the Buddha maintains his silence. When that traveller bid goodbye, Ānanda asked the master on the reason for that silence. The master told him that, had he asserted the existence of a Self, he would have been assuming a position identical to the thesis claimed by those he called “eternalists” (*sassata-vāda*), *i.e.*, those who claim that each being possesses an individual soul, eternal and incorruptible; on the other hand, had he denied the existence of the Self, he would have been assuming a position identical to the thesis advocated by those he called “abolitionists” (*uccheda-vāda*), to whom personal identity was just an illusion. The abolitionist interpretation had a huge impact on the history of Buddhism, mostly due to the decisive influence of the Buddhaghosa – an Indian medieval monk with the *Theravāda* school, author of this school’s most significant work, the *Visuddhimagga* (*The Path of Purification*). This work includes a statement which was later to become famed: “for there is suffering, but none who suffers”²³, which means that that which we call ‘person’ would be just a chain supported by the clusters, or, to quote William James’ well-known phrase, a “chain of consciousness”. That said, Gotama had clearly stated in the *Sabbāsava Sutta* (*MN 2:6*) that “when one reflects without wisdom [...] the vision ‘no Self exists for me’ emerges as true”.

One of the most interesting theories attempting to explain this attitude of Gotama, the Buddha, brings it closer to the solution established later on in the West by the Kantian tradition. There are two distinct aspects to this solution. On the one hand, to show that Hume’s thesis on the inexistence of a Self is unsustainable, for if it were true one would have to accept that there could be predicates – sensations, emotions, etc. – without a subject of which they could be predicates of. Simon Blackburn has recently addressed this notion, ironically observing that to state it would be as sensible as stating that the bumps in a smashed car could exist in the absence of the car, or that the Cheshire cat could, as it does in Lewis Carroll’s novel, vanish while leaving its smile intact²⁴. On the other hand, however,

²³ Buddhaghosa 1975: 521 (XVI: 90).

²⁴ Blackburn 1999: 136.

Gotama, the Buddha, seems to acknowledge that the Self of our experiences cannot be known at all, and that we can only say that it exists as something that accompanies all representations.

This interpretation of the Buddha's thesis on the Self (for its most part argued by Sue Hamilton, 2000) is, no doubt, quite a promising one. Gotama, the Buddha, does seem to favour a deafening silence when it comes to basic metaphysical questions. Example: before questions like the eternal nature, or the finiteness, of the world (*MN* 72: 3–14), his answer is invariably mute, be that silence grounded on ethical–moral reasons (what purpose is there for a man who finds himself seriously injured by an arrow to inquire into the material the arrow was made of, or the size of the bow, or the assailant's personality or his physiognomy,... ?) (*MN* 63:5), or on the belief that the best solutions are never the extreme ones. In the *Nidānasamyutta* (*SN* 12:15), in a passage concerning the World and of Self, Gotama says: “‘Everything exists’ [...] is an extreme. ‘Nothing exists’ is another extreme. Refraining from leaning towards any of these, [the Buddha] teaches the Dharma through the middle [path]”. But, if this is so, *i.e.*, if the speculative path leads us to a dead end, if it is wrong to state metaphysical propositions concerning the nature of the Self, or *attā*, why, then, does the Buddha proclaim the doctrine of non–self (*anattā*) in the quoted discourse?

Following a neo–Kantian interpretation of the text, such is to be understood as an epistemological strategy aimed at showing us that the elements conditioning the experience – and, ultimately, every phenomena, or *dharma* – are devoid of Self. Sue Hamilton offers us an enlightening analogy on Gotama's purpose²⁵. Imagine a situation in which a computer salesman is trying to teach us how a specific software programme works. Now, instead of listening attentively to the teachings of the salesman, we become mesmerised by the computer itself. While he patiently attempts to describe what we are required to do for that software to run smoothly, we are constantly interrupting him with questions regarding the different components of the computer and asking him if any of them is the computer. We point to the keyboard and ask: “Is *this* the computer?”, to which the salesman answers that it is not and attempts to resume his explanation. Unwisely, though, we insist on interrupting him and,

²⁵ Hamilton 2000: 24.

pointing to the monitor, to the operative system, to the memory, we ask him time and again “Is *this* the computer?”. Now, as Hamilton sagely points out: “Given my fascination, I am very puzzled about this, and though I continue to speculate as to exactly what the computer *is*, I also have the very distinct impression from what the salesman kept saying that there is really no such thing at all. It takes me a while to realise that what the computer was not *was not what the salesman was trying to tell me*.”²⁶ If we do look at the *Anattā Sutta* carefully, we can see that what the Buddha is doing is cumulatively denying that each of the elements conditioning our experience is, in itself, our identity.

Reading the text accordingly, all descriptions we may attempt to make about the world, including our own personal world, are conditioned by the factors determining the experience. This is tantamount to saying that any proposition about the nature of something that falls outside the scope of experience runs the risk of saying nothing at all. That is why most theories on personal identity amount to either trying to erroneously convince us that each of the conditioning factors is, *in itself*, that very identity, or that personal identity is just an illusion – stating, for instance, that memory, or the body, is the genuine criterion of identity, or that the subject is but multiplicity devoid of unity.

Albeit agreeing with many of the claims made by the neo-Kantian interpretation of Buddhism, I believe we can go further when it comes to the understanding of the Self. For two reasons: one, because in crucial moments of the Canon, Buddha uses the concept of Self – *attā* – as the ultimate referent of his inquiry, and not just as a mere grammatical expedient, as is argued by Peter Harvey²⁷. Let us see some exemplary passages. In his last discourse (DN 16:2.26), the Buddha addresses Ānanda saying: “You should become yourself (*attā*) in your island, you yourself (*attā*) being the refuge and having nothing else as your refuge”. In the *Dhammapada*, an aphoristic work deemed critical in Buddhist studies, an entire section is devoted to the issue of the Self (*attā*). And when can read in it: “The Self is indeed the lord of the Self; who else indeed could be lord?”; “If one knew the self to be dear, one would guard it well” (XII).

²⁶ 24.

²⁷ Harvey 1995: 19.

There is, however, a second reason leading me to consider that it is possible to state the existence of an experience of the Self. It is, in fact, an intuition crucial for Gotama, the Buddha, which Descartes will later come to assume in Western philosophy. We can only experience the finite, the contingent, the impermanent, and that is because we have the ability to sustain their contrary. “There is a not–born, not–become, a not–made, a not–compound. If that un–born, not–become, not–made, not–compounded were not, there would be no escape from what is born, become, made, compounded.” (*Udāna* 80)

The experience of the clusters’ finite and limited character is possible only insofar as we all have the ability to experience its contrary. Now, if there is an experience of the Self, why, then, has Gotama elected to keep silent on its nature? My answer to this question would be thus: because experiencing the Self is analogous to experiencing the void. The Self is the experience of the void within the World. Robert Thurman, in the work mentioned earlier, also points in this direction and I will borrow his words for closing my communication: “a voidness melting in a voidness. We can reassure ourselves that any voidness is not solid, but at the same time it is not nothing and cannot obstruct our awareness. (...) We lose all sense of boundary, all tension of struggle (...) This is the real self (...) embracing all others without neglecting ourselves. This is the essence of what the Buddha saw during his own meditation.”²⁸?

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²⁸ Thurman 1998: 81.

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LIČNI IDENTITET I ISTOČNJAČKA MISAO

Rezime

Namera ovog teksta jeste da pokaže da je problem ličnog identiteta temeljno pitanje klasične indijske misli. Uobičajeno, skloni smo mišljenju da je lični identitet tema zapadne filozofije, te tako skloni smo da zaboravimo značaj sopstva (Atman) u hinduizmu, pa čak i u budizmu. Autor pokazuje kako je indijska filozofija pristupala pitanju ličnog identiteta i koje je konkretno rešenje izloženo u delima koja se obično pripisuju Gotami Budi.

Ključne reči: lični identitet, sopstvo, budizam, hinduizam, Atman, Buda.