

Ātman (Self) and *Anātman* (No-Self): A Possible Reconciliation

Prof. Bina Gupta
Director, South Asian Studies Program
University of Missouri

In most common expositions of Indian philosophy the two traditions: self and no-self - are taken to be mutually incompatible. The former, having its origin in the Upaniṣads, finds expression in all *āstika darśanas*, though its clearest and most important exposition is found in Advaita Vedānta. The latter having its origin in the teachings of the Buddha finds varied expressions in different schools of Buddhism. The Advaita Vedānta accepts *ātman* and rejects *anattā*; the Buddhists argue for *anattā* and reject *ātman*.¹

My exposition in this paper is based primarily on the teachings of the Gautama Buddha and Śaṅkara, the founders of Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta respectively. Accordingly, unless otherwise specified, my use of the terms “Buddhist” and “Advaitins” refers to the teachings of these founders rather than to the later philosophers of these two traditions. I will begin with an overview of Advaita Vedānta.

Part I

Śaṅkara sums up his entire philosophy as follows: “The *brahman* is truth or real, the world is false (*mithyā*), and the individual self (*jīva*) and the *brahman* are non-different.” In order to preserve the integrity of his non-dualistic thesis, Śaṅkara argues that this one reality called in the Upaniṣadic texts “*brahman-ātman*,” is not only the stuff out of which all things are made, but is also the same as the inner self (*ātman*) within each individual self (*jīva*). The empirical world and selves on account of ignorance are superimposed upon this one reality.

Superimposition is erroneous cognition (*mithyā jñāna*), illusory appearance (*avabhāsa*); it is the cognition of “that” in what is “not-that.”² It is the apprehension of something as something else. It may be of two types: a) apprehending a thing as other than what it is (e.g., perceiving a rope as a snake, the *brahman* appearing as the manifold world of names and forms), and b) apprehending a thing as other than what it is (e.g., a crystal appearing red in the proximity of a red flower). The former is the false ascription of one thing to another, and the latter the false ascription of the attribute of one thing to another. Illusion is not possible in the absence of a substratum, and the object superimposed has an apparent existence dependent on the substratum - which is vaguely apprehended as “this.” There can be no illusion where the substratum is fully apprehended or not apprehended at all. Illusion disappears when the basis is clearly apprehended.

Brahman-ātman, the one undifferentiated objectless and subjectless, self-luminous reality (having no beginning and end), manifests everything in the world. However, until

¹The Sanskrit term “*ātman*,” though often translated as “self,” does not refer to the “I,” the individual self. Both “*cit*” (usually translated as “consciousness”) and “*ātman*” refer to pure consciousness, a kind of trans-empirical consciousness, which not only is different from the individual self, but also forms its basis. In this paper, I will use “self,” “soul,” “pure consciousness,” “real self,” “pure subject,” “pure self,” and “substantial self” interchangeably to connote *ātman* or *cit*, to be distinguished from, the *jīva*, the “empirical self,” the “I,” the “ego,” the “individual self,” or the “empirical consciousness.”

²*adhyāso nāma atasmin tadbuddhiḥ*, Śaṅkara’s “*Adhyāsabhāṣya*” of *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (BSBh).

brahman-ātman realization, all knowing that takes place in the empirical world holds good. Thus although ultimately devaluing the metaphysical status of the empirical world and the empirical selves to false appearances, Śaṃkara worked hard to preserve the empiricity of things that have qualities and are designated by names.

In his *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* (BSBh, II.3.50), Śaṃkara states that “the *jīva* is not the highest *ātman*, because it is perceived to be different on account of different limiting adjuncts; it is also not different from the *ātman*, because it is the *ātman* that as *jīvātman* has entered in all bodies. We may call a “*jīva*” a reflection of the *ātman*.” Thus, the *jīva* is both a reality and appearance; it is reality insofar as it is grounded in *ātman* and it is an appearance insofar as it is finite and empirical. In other words, the *jīva* is empirically real. The Advaitins offer several metaphors to explain the status of *jīva*, e.g., the metaphors of reflection³ and limitation.⁴ The *ātman*, the true self, appears to be many, in the same way as one moon in the sky appears to be many when reflected in many pools of water, or the one space appears to be many, owing to many limitations imposed upon it. In short, in Advaita Vedānta, the “I,” the subject, (*asmat pratyaya*) designates the empirical self *ultimately* referring back to its groundedness in the *ātman*; the “I” symbolically points in the direction of the *ātman*, the pure self.

Part II

Whereas Śaṃkara following the Upaniṣads postulates an essence, an identical *ātman*, in all individual beings and takes the “I,” an individual self, to be a combination of a body and a soul, the Buddha argues that there is no *ātman*. Troubled by the sights of disease, death, old age, etc., the Buddha searched for the truth, attained *nirvāṇa*, and discovered *pratītyasamutpāda* (“dependent arising,” or “dependent origination”). In the Buddhist texts, the formula of dependent arising has often been expressed in the following words: “When this is, that comes to be; on the arising of that, this arises. When this is not, that is not; on the cessation of that, this ceases.” (*Majjhima Nikāya*, I.262-64.) In other words, depending on the cause, the effect arises; when the cause ceases to exist, the effect also ceases to exist. This doctrine of dependent arising, essentially a doctrine of causality formulated in terms of the twelvefold links, includes within its fold such important interrelated notions as moral responsibility, rebirth, craving, death, consciousness, the nature of psychophysical personality, etc. In the words of the Buddha: “He who perceives causation perceives the *dharma*.” (*Majjhima Nikāya*, I.190-91.) There are two corollaries of this causal law: “all things are non-eternal (*anitya*),”⁵ and “there is no substantial self (*anattā*).”

“All is impermanent” (“*sarvam anityam*”) was one of the Buddha’s frequent utterances. Given that everything is conditional and relative, everything passes through the process of birth, growth, decay, and death. In the early texts, “impermanence” is used synonymously with “arising and passing away.” “Impermanent things are indeed

³ The Advaitins of the Vivaraṇa school argue that just as the reflection of the sun or the moon appears to be different depending on whether the water is clean or dirty, calm or disturbed, similarly, the reflection of pure consciousness varies according to the degree of ignorance in which it is reflected. They hold that the *jīva* as the reflected image is as real as the prototype.

⁴ The Advaitins of the Bhāmatī persuasion argue that an individual self is a limitation of pure consciousness on account of ignorance, the limiting factor. Space, though really one, is seen to have been divided in particular spaces, like the space in a room, in a pitcher, and so on. Similarly, the Self, though one, is seen to be many.

⁵ There are two aspects of this assertion: negative and positive. The negative thesis states that there is nothing permanent; everything is in a perpetual flux. But there is no unanimity regarding the positive thesis. One version of the positive thesis states that “all things are *anitya*” means “everything is momentary.” Modern scholars, e.g., Kalupahana argue that the Buddha only taught the doctrine of impermanence, and that the “doctrine of moments” was “formulated from a *logical* analysis of the process of change” by the later Buddhists (Kalupahana, 1976, 36).

conditioned; they are of the nature of arising and passing away. Having come into being they cease to exist” (*Dīgha Nikāya*, II.157). Each factor of the twelvefold links conditions and is conditioned by preceding factors. There is nothing permanent; things are impermanent not because they are momentary, but because they are characterized by arising and perishing. Due to the limitations of our sensory apparatus, we are not able to perceive changes that take place, but change is taking place all the time. Permanence, essence, unchanging substances, exist only in thought, not in reality. There is nothing eternal, neither in the external world nor in the inner life of consciousness. Whatever is reborn is impermanent.

The denial of permanence has important ramifications for the Buddhist account of the self.⁶ Not unlike the British philosopher David Hume, the Buddha argues that when we look within ourselves, we do not find any abiding essence, any permanent self, but only a series of successive instants. The empirical self consists of five aggregates intertwined with each other in a complicated manner. These five *skandhas* are: bodily form (matter or body), sensations (feelings, sensations, sense object contact, etc.), perceptions (recognition, understanding, and naming), dispositions (impressions of *karmas*), and consciousness. There is within anyone’s life of consciousness a series of bodily consciousness, feelings or affective states, perceptions, conceptions and naming, dispositions (effects of past experiences), and awareness. These five aggregates together are known as “*nāma-rūpa*.” *Rūpa* signifies body, and *nāma* stands for various such processes as feelings, sensations, perceptions, ideas, and so on.

The self, as a moment within the life of consciousness, is also a flowing entity, each moment being an S_n . The self, à la Hume, is reducible to $s_1, s_2 \dots s_n$. Within this flow, there is no identity; each succeeding element (s_n) has a similarity to the just preceding s_{n-1} . These five *skandhas* that constitute an empirical self are impermanent, so they cannot give rise to a permanent self. The Buddha provides many similes to explain the arising of an empirical self. One of his favorite examples was that of a chariot (Warren, 1963, 133). As a chariot is nothing more than an arrangement of axle, wheels, pole and other constituent parts in a certain order, but when we take the constituents apart, there is no chariot; similarly, “I” is nothing but an arrangement of five *skandhas* in a certain order, but when we examine the *skandhas* one by one, we find that there is no permanent entity, there is no “I,” there is only a name (*nāma*) and a form (*rūpa*). In short, the Buddha replaces the permanent self S of Advaita by a series, i.e., $(S =) s_1, s_2, s_3 \dots s_i, s_{i+1}, s_{i+2}, \dots$. This series continues through rebirth and is completely terminated in *nirvāṇa*.

Part III

In my zeal to reconcile these two powerful insights, I looked to the literature of Indian philosophy for help, but to no avail. The help, however, came from Western phenomenology, especially from Edmund Husserl’s work on time-consciousness.⁷ In this paper I am going to confine myself to only those ideas of Husserl that provide insights into resolving the tension between the Advaita and the Buddhist accounts of the self. To be specific, for my present purposes, I wish to focus on four features of Husserlian account: a method and three theses, all four central to Husserlian phenomenology.

Phenomenologists (for example, Husserl) do not generally talk about the “self”; Husserl rather talks about the “I” (the *Ich*), more often translated as “ego.” In order to separate the pure subjectivity from the objective world, Husserl employs the method of

⁶ *Anattā* was the Buddha’s answer to both the essentialists and non-essentialists alike.

⁷ My interpretation is based on Brough’s English translation of Husserl’s phenomenology of time consciousness and his paper “The Emergence of Absolute Consciousness.”

reduction or *epochē* (*Ideas I*, §§ 31-32), which requires that we bracket out everything that is an object, or even a possible object, until we are left with the pure subjectivity. The Phenomenologists usually use the terms “empirical” and “transcendental.” Everything empirical is bracketed, so that as though through a process of step-by-step purification, what remains is the transcendental ego, the pure subject.

With the above in mind, let me move to the three theses. The first thesis concerns intentionality. Consciousness, argues Husserl, is intentional in the sense that it is always directed toward something. Such intentional acts as perceiving, believing, imagining, feeling, and willing, are all directed to objects (real, unreal, or ideal) in the world. Irrespective of the ontological status of the object, every act of consciousness intends its object in a certain manner and as having a specific meaning or significance. Husserl calls the object in its specific manner of being intended “*noema*.” Consciousness then is a correlation between “act and its *noema*” (*Husserliana III*, §§ 88 & 98). The acts, holds Husserl, have two poles, the object pole and the subject pole. My perceptions and beliefs, imaginations and affections, willings, and emotional acts, indeed all such acts are performed by an “I.” An initial characterization of the self in terms of intentional acts would be to say that the self is the point of origin, the subject pole, of all my intentional acts (*Husserliana III*, § 37; *Husserliana I*, §§ 30-37). It is reflection that constitutes the ego. This is how the ego or the “I” appears in Husserl’s discussions of intentionality in the *Ideas I*.⁸

The second thesis concerns the idea of “constitution,” which is closely connected to the distinction between the empirical and the transcendental. The intentionality of the subject constitutes the unity of an object and thereby also the unity of the world. The precise sense of constitution is very difficult to determine but the constituted stands midway between being-already-there and being produced by the subject. It rules out the two prevailing pictures of experience: at the one end is the picture of passively receiving what is given, and, at the other end, the picture of actively creating from within. It is indeterminate when considered in light of the opposition between passivity and pure activity. To take it a step further, one can say that all constitution is constitution of meaning. Insofar as an object is a structure of meanings; it is constituted by the subject. Thus, we can say that all empirical is constituted and the transcendental constitutes.

The third thesis concerns temporality. Intending an object, argues Husserl, always takes place within a horizon (*Ideas I*, § 81). Not only is the object perceived or cognized against the background of a context, but the perceiving itself takes place within the horizon of one’s mental life. Time, Husserl maintains, is the most comprehensive horizon within which all intentionality functions. Every intentional act occurs within the temporal flow of the subject’s consciousness. In this sense, one can say that consciousness is temporal. However, the temporality of consciousness does not consist in a succession of perishing instants. It rather consists in the now’s being surrounded by a temporal horizon such that a now, together with its just past, is always retained in consciousness, and the not-yet future is anticipated as emerging into consciousness. Temporality of consciousness always has the structure protention-now-retention. As this structure recedes into the past, the new ones replace it in such a manner that we have a continuous flux of consciousness. Thus, consciousness is a stream of experience (*erlebnisstrom*) in which nothing abides except the protention-now-retention structure. In this stream of experience, the “I” is reduced to the moving stream of consciousness seemingly beginningless and endless. No beginning because every now fulfills a prior protention, no end, because

⁸ *Ideas I*, § 32: Every consciousness can be reflected upon...; § 45: Prior to reflection there is a pre-reflective awareness of it.

every now that recedes into the past can be revived in memory until it is lost into the darkness of forgetting. The Husserlian ego, even as transcendental, is temporal. The “pure subject,” to use Husserl’s very difficult expression, “temporalizes”; it is the source of time. It is neither a process in time nor an entity outside of time. As streaming-standing flux,⁹ it generates objective temporality.

Part IV

It is now time that we return to the main theme of the paper, i.e., to institute a comparison of Husserl with Śaṃkara and the Buddha. I will begin with Husserl and Śaṃkara.

In reviewing the method and the three theses discussed above, we see that in both, the self as pure subject (*ātman*) is the condition of the possibility of objectivity and in that sense it is transcendental. However, on the Advaita view, unlike Husserl, there is no inherent intentionality in the *ātman*, which cannot of its own resources be intentional due to a deep conceptual as well as a phenomenological problem with regard to the nature of consciousness or subjectivity. The Advaitins define consciousness as self-luminous (*svayam prakāśatva*); it is not intentional. Consciousness is said to be *prakāśa eka rasa*, i.e., manifestation is its only essence. In Advaita discourse, *avidyā* functions as the source of intentionality by building upon earlier traces of *avidyā* in an endless process. The relation between the pure subject and *avidyā* in Advaita is very difficult to grasp, yet this relationship is central to its metaphysics.

In the very opening chapter of BSBh, an opponent is made to raise the question: how can the subject and the object though opposed to each other as light and darkness be together? In response, Śaṃkara says: “true, it is precisely the reason why this, viz., consciousness, as being of an object, should be false (*mithyā*).” A very strange conclusion indeed! Instead of asserting that the phenomenon of intentionality testifies to the fact that the subject and the object are not opposed to each other, Śaṃkara treats intentionality as purely phenomenal; it does not belong to the order of reality. Thus there are two possible moves: (1) one may regard that the very phenomenon of intentionality shows that the self-shining inner consciousness, the pure subject, is nevertheless directed towards objects and that both the inward and outward directedness are constitutive of it. (2) Alternately, one may hold that the self-shining consciousness in its pure inwardness is the truth of consciousness and relegate the outward directedness of intentionality to phenomenal appearance. Husserl chooses the first, and Śaṃkara the second. It is not an exaggeration to say that in many different ways the second move constitutes an important strand of Indian spiritual thinking. We owe to Śaṃkara its theoretical formulation but its most famous practical formulation is found in Patañjali’s *Yogasūtras*, where *yoga* is defined as “cessation of mental modifications (*cittavṛtti nirodha*), that arise under the influence of the objects” (*Yogasūtras*, I.1.1).

Consciousness on the Advaita view *cannot constitute*; it can *only show* that which is already constituted by virtue of its luminosity. For the Advaitin, objects have do not have any meaning intrinsically; it is their mutual relationships in the world that confers meaning on them. Thus, from the standpoint of the phenomenal world, the *brahman* as *Īśvara* is said to be the creator of the world. Consciousness cannot confer meaning on objects; it at once brings to light the meaning that the world confers on them as well as

⁹ “Urmodal stehendes-strömendes Leben und darin meine urprimordialen Implikationen, erste Schicht der Weltkonstitution, die meine urmodale Eigenheit bzw. meine Ur-‘Monade’ ausmachen.” *Husserliana* (Materialien Series), VIII, 20. Again, “Und zwar ist dieser urlebendige Strom, die lebendige, in ihrer Lebendigkeit strömende Bewußtseinsgegenwart—mein.” *Husserliana* (Erste Philosophie Series), XIV, 436.

their falsity. On the other hand, the idea of “meaning” is an integral part of the Husserlian phenomenology, in the absence of which Husserlian intentionality cannot work. In Husserl’s writings intentionality is a correlation between *noesis* and *noema*, act and meaning (*Ideas I*, §§ 88 & 99).

Consciousness in Advaita is not only non-intentional and non-constitutive, but also non-temporal. Time belongs to the form of the objective world, and does not apply to the pure subject. Every intentional act takes place within the temporal flow of the subject’s consciousness. Husserl was really concerned with the problem regarding how this flux comes to be constituted. He eventually came to recognize that a flux could be presented as a flux only to a consciousness that is not a flux, a consciousness that comprehends the flux as a whole. He then realized that there is a dimension of consciousness that is “standing while streaming.” The metaphor is interesting. The streaming absolute consciousness is neither a substance that remains permanent (like Śaṅkara’s *cit* or *ātman* which is not a substance) nor it is a container that holds the flux within it. If it is standing, then it is not moving; this not moving is nothing but another aspect of the moving. Thus the thesis does not amount to positing two levels of reality. In other words, it is not an ontological thesis, but a phenomenological thesis with regard to the way the time is experienced at different levels. Using Husserlian metaphor, the Advaitic *ātman* may be said to be standing but not streaming. The Buddhist *anattā* as a union of five impermanent *skandhas*, on the other hand, as we will see next, may be said to be streaming, but not standing.

It is not an exaggeration to say that in many ways the Buddha is much closer to Husserl than Śaṅkara. Both Husserl and Buddha instantiate what is usually called “process philosophies.” They both hold that there is no enduring *ātman*; there are only experiences.

In order to provide a successful challenge to the Advaita theory of the *ātman*, the Buddhist may simply appeal to phenomenological basis to demonstrate that there is no such eternal spiritual substance. The Buddhist may argue that in directing my attention to my own inner life in search of this presumed *ātman*, I find no such *ātman*. If there were such an *ātman*, then an experience of it would be available; however, one cannot indeed identify such an experience. Any experience that one may have would be a unique event in time, occurring at a particular moment, and if it has an object distinguished from experience, then that object must also share in its temporality and passing character. The supposed experience of an eternal substantial entity then would be a contradiction in terms. The argument may be elaborated and defended as follows.

Let there be a putative experience e_1 occurring at the moment t_1 . This e_1 by hypothesis is an evidencing or presenting of an eternal entity O , that is to say, whose being is not restricted to t_1 . The Buddhist question would be: how is this possible? Whence does e_1 derive its ability to present, render evidence, and testify to the supposed eternal object o_1 , which goes far beyond O at t_1 ? If every experience presents its own object, then e_1 will present o_1 , e_2 will present o_2 , and so forth. There would be no experience, no E , whose object is O . This argument obviously has some limitations, and I must direct the attention of my readers to these limitations. The picture of experience as consisting of a series of instantaneous events $e_1, e_2, e_3 \dots$, each having its own object $o_1, o_2, o_3 \dots$, is suspiciously simple. There are many features of our experience of things, including my experience of myself, which do not fall into this pattern. For we do not simply see a thing at a moment, but we also see it as being the same as that we had seen before. At each moment, we not only experience a momentary objective event, but also remember what we had seen before, recognize the presumed identity of a thing or see through its pretended identity, viz., its difference from what was seen before. In other

words, we see similarities and differences, which lead to an experience of a universal class whose members I have experienced before and remember now. In short, experience is not merely a serial ordering of e_1 , e_2 , e_3 , etc., but also involves a synthesis, a combination, a putting together, or in the Kantian language, a synoptic view of several things together.

Granting this intervention, the Buddhist might still ask: what does it substantiate? Can such a synoptic vision of what is now and what was in the past, that is, the putting together of the past and the present evidence the being of an eternal entity? It can utmost present an entity now as being the same as that entity then, but it cannot present to us an entity having no beginning and no end, unchanging, and timeless. Even assuming that it presents a limited identity and continuity through a slice of time from t_2 through t_4 , the experience of it would occupy the moment t_4 ; it cannot testify to the existence of an eternal being. In other words, e_4 may under certain circumstances testify to the presence of an object that remains the same from t_2 through t_4 . This indeed is possible, and this is how we experience the sundry familiar things of the world around us.

Husserl also represents the experience of an ego by the metaphor of a stream. A stream is not a substantial identity, there is nothing that endures in the flow of the stream, as Heraclitus pointed out, we never step into the same water twice; it is constantly changing. But this picture of a stream or experiences, as Husserl presents it, is considerably more sophisticated than the picture the Heraclitean flux evokes. This sophisticated picture allows Husserl to confer greater explanatory power on experience than it would otherwise have. First of all, he rejects the picture of the flow of time as consisting of perishing instants. There is no more now that divides the past from the future or the no-more from the not-yet. On the contrary, in Husserl's account, the now as it emerges fulfills not only the past expectations, but also carries within it both a memory of what is just gone and an anticipation of what is just about to come. The immediate no-more and the just not-yet are the two horizons within the bosom of the now. This picture enables Husserl to account for a certain continuity of our time consciousness instead of a mere series of perishing instants. But the continuity of this stream of experience is not the continuity of a timeless being underlying the flow of time, but a continuity that is being constituted by the flow. Thus, experience, for Husserl, is not a series of instantaneous events, e_1 , e_2 , e_3 , etc., but a process in which experiences as they recede into the past are held fast in memory, which can be reactivated at any time and thereby be made present or presentified. By the act of recollection of the past, or what Husserl calls "*wiedererinnerung*" a stretch of time in the past can be presentified at a moment now, and this personification can be a valid recollection of the past although presentified now. Likewise an experience of a moment, a now, has often the ability to refer intentionally to a future possibility, even if that possibility is not now actualized. By virtue of such cross references, we are not left with the solipsism of the present, total confinement to the now, but we are able to build up identities and continuities which always go beyond the confines of the now. Time apart from the flow of consciousness is an abstraction, and neither Husserl nor Buddha had any interest in it.

The above discussion of experience makes it obvious that both the Buddha and Husserl describe a person's experience as a stream (*pravāha*), both recognize that in course of this stream of experience the familiar objects of the world as well as the identities of persons are constituted. Notwithstanding the close affinity between the Husserlian and the Buddhist accounts, one must not lose sight of the fact that whereas the Buddha describes the flow in terms of arising and perishing, Husserl describes it in terms of not-yet and no-more. In many respects the Buddha's account is more radical because

he does not admit a now intervening between the two. There is no simple being that arises and perishes; there is simply arising and perishing.

Nevertheless, since there is arising and perishing, one might ask: are the events of consciousness, once they perish, gone forever? Do they disappear into nothingness? Is this not very different from the Husserlian thesis that what is now is still retained even when receding into more and more past so that it can be revived or awakened by memory? It ceases to be the now, a new now replaces it, but the past now is still there to be recalled. Husserl recognized, as stated earlier, that beyond a certain point, the past nows go back into the darkness of forgetfulness (for example, of the early childhood, or as the Buddha and Śaṃkara would say, “of the past lives”) there is still the possibility that the past *nows* penetrate into this darkness more and more. Thus it is not surprising that in his scattered thoughts on death, Husserl considered the possibility of dying as falling into a deep sleep. The Buddha took a more or less a clean, less hypothetical, attitude to the possibility of recalling the past experiences even across the boundaries of birth and death. That is why I suspect that even in the absence of a rigorous description of the flow and a theory of time, the Buddha and Husserl are engaged in the same sort of activities.

To sum up: both the Buddha and Husserl do not recognize an enduring *ātman* that has all the experiences. The Buddha points out that the experiences of the events of consciousness by virtue of their union create the semblance of an owner, an “I.” For Husserl the I is both empirical and transcendental: it is empirical when considered to be part of this world, transcendental when considered as the source of the constitution of the world itself. In other words, the pure subject or the transcendental ego is the “I” for Husserl. Husserl draws our attention to this thesis in his numerous accounts regarding how consciousness from its original temporal flux becomes unified and centered in an ego. The resulting Husserlian position is closer to the Buddhist view that the self is really a series of psycho-physical events unified by a sense of “I” rather than to the Advaitin unchanging spiritual substance or soul.

In the Advaita Vedānta, pure subject is reached only when its association with the “I” is removed. Husserl’s position is supported by the fact that the word “I” always refers to the self of the speaker. Even Śaṃkara acknowledges it in the opening paragraph of his BSBh, when he says that the self is the referent of the “I,” whereas the not-self is the referent of “you,” and by implication, of “this.” But this admission should be understood in the proper context. The “I” does not refer to the subject of the speaker in the same way as the name Bina Gupta does. The “I” is not a name. Nor does it have a purely conceptual meaning, viz., the speaker, whoever she or he may be.

In the context of discussing the question of the relation between the empirical and the universal self, the Advaitins often use the metaphor of space and point out how one space appears to be many owing to various limiting factors. Given that the *jīva* and the *ātman* are non-different, one could venture the following suggestion: while the *jīva* is continually moving, streaming (caught up in *saṃsāra*, which, in the Indian tradition goes from this life to the next), the *ātman* is a standing, unmoving, and unindividuated or undifferentiated dimension of the *jīva*. There is a tendency among writers on Vedānta to separate the *jīva* and the *ātman* ontologically which may be a mistake in view of Śaṃkara’s explicit statement that the *jīva* is non-different from the *brahman*. The statement suggests that the unmoving, undifferentiated unindividuated *ātman*—for which all flux, stream, motion, change are possible objects—lies at the deepest recesses of the *jīva*. While the Upaniṣads show us a path which one can follow to reach this depth (the main stages in the path being waking, dreaming, deep dreamless sleep, and the beyond), Husserl struggles with time consciousness, shows another path by following which one begins to make sense of the thesis which originally might have seemed to be inaccessible

to a phenomenological disclosure. Thus, though Husserlian phenomenology still remains at some distance from Advaita Vedānta phenomenology, we begin to realize that that distance is not as great as we initially thought it to be. Husserl's two layers of selfhood--the Humean flow which generates temporality and an absolute standing-streaming consciousness which remains the same amidst streaming - are phenomenologically given. The self in its totality is both; it is a flow in time like the Buddhist union of impermanent *skandhas*, but it also stands above time like the Advaitin *ātman*.

Part V

This final and the concluding section points to further directions that may be pursued and the lines of thought that may be developed in connection with the comparison under consideration.

Apropos here is Husserl's understanding of Buddhism. After reading Karl Eugen Neuman's German translation of various sections of the classical Buddhist texts *Suttapiṭaka*, Husserl in his very brief article entitled "*Über die Reden Gotamo Buddhos*," (Husserl, "On the Discourses of Gautama Buddha," 1925, 18-19) characterizes the thoughts of the Buddha as having a "transcendental character." Husserl states that Buddhism is "probably the highest flower of Indian religiosity, a religiosity which looks purely inward in vision and deed—which, I would say, is not 'transcendent,' but 'transcendental.'" He further adds that Buddhism "is concerned with a religious and ethical method of the highest dignity for spiritual purification and pacification, a method thought through and practiced with an almost incomparable internal coherence, energy and nobility of the mind. Buddhism can only be paralleled with the highest formations of philosophical and religious spirit of our European culture." (Chattopadhyaya, Embree, and Mohanty, 1992, 25-26).

Buddhism is "transcendental," argues Husserl, because it suggests an inner attitude, the "pure seeing." In Buddhism, each practitioner focuses on his own subjectivity by directing his attention purely toward his own inner life. In such an attitude the world becomes a mere phenomenon in subjectivity. The Buddha shows us the possibility of "essential seeing," and the Buddhist *bodhi* provides insights into the absolute practical truth.

Anyone familiar with the thoughts of Husserl, knows well that for Husserl "pure *theōria*" oriented towards universality is the only form of intellectual activity that is worthy of being called "philosophy." His use of the term "transcendental" to describe Buddhism—the term he uses to describe the theoretical activity of his own transcendental phenomenology—is revealing. In so describing, Husserl assigns to Buddhism a theoretical status as high as his own transcendental philosophy. It points to the fact that in his estimation the importance of Buddhism is not simply limited to ethical-religious aspects. Husserl concludes the paper by noting that he is not suggesting that there are no differences between the Buddhist and the European transcendental attitudes, but he does not discuss what these differences might be.

In another very short text written in 1926 entitled "Socrates - Buddha,"¹⁰ Husserl compares his own transcendental phenomenology to the conceptions found in the Buddha and Socrates. Husserl also outlines some important differences between the Buddhist and the European transcendental attitudes. The Buddhist reflective attitude is directed purely

¹⁰ According to Schuhmann Husserl had discussed Buddhism in a seminar held in the winter semester of 1925-26. However, the notes of this seminar in Husserl Archives are very sketchy and do not provide a basis for an informed decision (Schuhmann, 1992, "Husserl and Indian Thought," 28-29. Also see, Lau, Kwok-ying (2004-2005), "*Husserl, Buddhism, and the Problematic of the Crisis of European*"

inwards in which one uses the method of meditational practices to withdraw from the mundane life in order to realize the highest religious and ethical ideal. Greek philosophers use this reflective attitude to make a distinction between *epistemē* and *doxa*, i.e., knowledge and opinion. This reflective attitude, argues Husserl, signifies the beginning of a “philosophical attitude,” which shows to the Buddha and Socrates the path to attain self-realization, *nirvāṇa* for the Buddha and virtuous life for Socrates. Such an attitude is neither theoretical nor practical. He calls this attitude a kind of “universal attitude,” which encompasses both the theoretical and the practical within its fold. It is “accomplished in the transition from the theoretical to the practical” in which *theōria* arising from *epochē* of all practices gives rise to a new praxis whose goal is to elevate humanity based on theoretical insights. It does so “according to the norms of truth of all forms, to transform it from the bottom up into a new humanity made capable of an absolute self-responsibility on the basis of absolute theoretical insights” (Carr, 1970, 283). The Buddhist meditational technique of relinquishing craving, clinging, attachment compares very favorably to Husserl’s *epochē*, i.e., suspension of all natural beliefs and attitudes. Thus, although Husserl generally regarded phenomenology as a theoretical science, he gradually came to recognize the significance of the practical, which makes his difference from Buddhism still less.

In the preceding paragraphs, Husserl makes two important distinctions in the context of discussing the Buddha’s philosophy: 1) the distinction between the “transcendental” and the “transcendent,” and 2) the theory practice distinction. Before concluding this paper, I will discuss these distinctions in the context of Advaita Vedānta.

There is no evidence to support that Husserl ever read any translation of the Advaita classics; whenever Husserl mentions “Indian thought,” he means “Buddhism.”¹¹ I wonder if he had in fact read any Advaita classics how he would have characterized Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta. Given that Śaṅkara, like the Buddha, focuses on “pure seeing,” Husserl would have no problem in characterizing Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta as “transcendental.”¹² However, in Advaita the *brahman-ātman* is not only “transcendental,” it is also “transcendent” because in its pure nature, *brahman-ātman* is beyond all sensuous experiences. In the absence of *ātman* there would be no knowledge, empirical or otherwise.

Regarding the theory-practice distinction, it is worth noting that in Advaita Vedānta no amount of meditational practices can “bring about” *mokṣa*, which is not an effect. Were it an effect, it would be perishable. When ignorance is removed, the self shines forth in its purity. *Mokṣa* is not a state reached by mental purification. Meditational practices, noble actions, contribute to the purification of the mind (*cittavṛtti*) and make the agent a more appropriate aspirant (*adhikārī*) for knowledge. Knowledge alone “brings about” *mokṣa*; it is realizing one’s non-difference from the *brahman*. The *brahman* simply *is*; it does not *really* become.

Having said this let me conclude by noting that the theory practice distinction merits further examination. The thesis - of those who repeatedly argue that pure theoretical thinking requires renouncing all practical interests - is circular, as it requires one to distinguish between theoretical and practical interests only when the distinction

¹¹ Schuhmann notes: whenever Husserl mentions Indian thought in his manuscripts, he refers to Neuman’s German translation of the Buddhist scriptures.” Karl Schuhmann. “Husserl and Indian Thought” in *Phenomenology and Indian Philosophy*, D. P. Chattopadhyaya, Lester Embree and Jitendranath Mohanty (eds.), New Delhi, India: The Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1992, pp.25-26.

¹² On the Advaita account, consciousness in one sense is transcendent because in its pure nature it goes beyond all sensuous experience. However, it is also transcendental, in the sense that consciousness is the basic presupposition of all knowing. In the absence of consciousness no knowledge would be possible, empirical or otherwise.

between theory and practice is already presupposed. Is there such a thing as pure theory except in formal logic? There is always a theory of practice and a practice of theory; the two go hand in hand. However, this is not the place to enter into a detailed examination of the theory-practice distinction. For our purposes the following would suffice.

The goal of either Śaṃkara or the Buddha was not to construct a philosophical system, but to show the path to the truth, *mokṣa* and *nirvāṇa* respectively. Such an eschatological concern is hardly to be expected from a Western phenomenologist. Husserl wrote in the midst of great personal suffering from the escalation of Nazism in Germany. The political crisis of the 30's is well known. He believed that transcendental phenomenology - by demonstrating the autonomy of the subject and the community of subjects—would be able to put a stop to the powerful forces of objectification. It goes without saying that Husserl was not hoping for either *mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa* for the West. However, it is important to underscore the point that Husserl was also inspired by the idea that discovering the truth about our deeper selves, i.e., about the true nature of consciousness can serve the highest practical purposes of life.

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