

THE IDENTITY OF THE SELF

(An analytical approach based on early Sanskrit texts)

The dictionary meaning of the word self is given as 'an identical person, ego, identity, what one is' etc. These various meanings do not tell us what self actually is but it only describes what is already known; i. e., it signifies a person who exists. That this question must have puzzled our ancients as well is revealed to us in the extant literature. Though questions like the reality of the outside phenomena and the origin of the world are expressly stated in Vedic literature as, for instance, in the *Nāsadīya-Sūkta*, a specific quest for the self in man seems to be a later development, during the time of the *Upaniṣads*. It appears, as if, the Vedic seers were, to begin with, more concerned with analysing external phenomena. The *Nāsadīya-sūkta* begins with the profound statement that 'there was not the non-existent nor the existent then;' ¹ and is not able to come to any final conclusion regarding the underlying unity on the external side. But the quest for the reality on the objective side is easily discernible. Statements like 'That One breathed windless by its own power, other than that there was not anything beyond'² have already set the stage for further philosophical development in the *Upaniṣads*. What is perhaps significant is that, by the time of the *Upaniṣads* a shift in thought had taken place. The emphasis has now moved from the external phenomena to the individual himself. The period in between, i. e., that of the *brahmanas*, was caught up in explaining and justifying various sacrificial acts and therefore, no useful philosophical advancement was achieved during that period. It was left to the *Upaniṣads* to develop the germs of philosophical speculation sown in the *Vedas*, the basis of which must have been the search for identity of the self. The reasons for the necessity of this search for an internal identity are not given in so many words in the *Upaniṣads*. The period of argumentation and logic is the period of the *sūtras* and the *bhāṣyas* wherein each philosophical system will come out with its arguments for a particular theory it propounds.

The reasoning in the *Upaniṣads* is mainly speculative. In the course of their speculation they throw up a number of possi-

bilities on the question of the identity of the self. Starting with the basic question as to whether the self is identical with the various sense-organs they come to the conclusion, by a process of elimination, that the self cannot be identified with any of the sense organs—whether of knowledge or of action. This is easily deduced from the fact that the sense of identity is not lost even when any of the sense-organs is impaired. Thus many a parable, like the one in the *Kenopanishad*, is narrated to point out that the search for the self has to be carried beyond what is ordinarily comprehensible to man.³

If one were to reconstruct an imaginary process by which the Upaniṣadic seers reached their conclusions it could be somewhat like this, keeping in mind the two trends of thought discernible in the Upaniṣads i. e., (1) The analysis from the gross to the subtle and (2) The argument based on the principle of consciousness. The Upaniṣadic seers must have pondered on the question of personal identity as understood in day to day dealings. A person 'X' does undergo a number of changes during his growth from childhood to adulthood and old age. Yet he is recognized as 'X' during the whole span of his existence. Combined with this is the added fact that even if 'X' loses an eye or some other limb he is yet recognized as 'X'. Thus it must have struck the seers that personal identity is something which transcends different moments of time as well as different physical changes. It is thus an enduring entity which remains constant when other physical properties change.

As a next step the Upaniṣadic seers must have wondered whether personal identity has something to do with the mind. Can the mind be identified with the sense of 'I'? But in experience, they must have realised that the mental states are always referring to something other than the mind and therefore the mental series cannot be identified with the sense of 'I'. A further reason is that the notion of identity has to be a constant factor abiding throughout all the states. This automatically rules out the mind as the identity factor. As the sense of identity persists even after deep sleep, when the mind and the body are dead to all practical purposes, the Upaniṣadic seer sought for the principle of identity in something other than the body or the mind.

Statements such as 'the objects are superior to the senses, the mind is superior to the objects, the intellect is superior to the

mind, the Great Ātman is again superior to the intellect';⁴ or the set of verses beginning as 'what speech cannot reveal but what reveals speech know that alone as the self and not this that people worship here'⁵ represent the first trend i. e., the analysis from the gross to the subtle.

At this point the close connection between knowledge and the sense of 'I' must have struck our philosopher. Every cognition, he must have noticed, has reference to a constant subject without reference to whom there can only be disconnected knowledge experience. Arguing from this reference to a constant self in all knowledge-experience and the connection of the self with every memory, the Upaniṣadic seer must have concluded that the notion of self or 'I' or 'aham', whose very nature is consciousness itself, should be the one constant in all experience. The search for a personal identity has thus ended in the Upaniṣads with the concept of the self which is the subject of all knowledge. This idea is expressed in such statements as 'this great, endless, infinite reality is but pure intelligence,'⁶ 'through what should one know that owing to which all this is known-through what O Maitreyi, should one know the knower'⁷.

As to the next natural question, whether this sense of personal identity known as the self can itself become a matter of experience, the Upaniṣads say that it can be realized only in an intuitive way and cannot be experienced in the way one experiences a sense-object or be thought of in the way one thinks of an object. Being the principle of consciousness it cannot itself be perceived. Thus the Kenopanishad says, 'I do not think I know well but not that I do not know, I know too. Who amongst us comprehends it both as the not-unknown and as the known he comprehends it'⁸.

There are many enigmatic statements in the Upaniṣads saying that the self is unknown to him who understands it and known to him who understands it not. This concept of 'I' cannot itself be the object of any conceptual thinking or rational arguments. This self is not to be known through study of the Vedas nor through intellectual thinking or by much learning.⁹ But this does not preclude the possibility of the self being realized in an intuitive way. Since the Upaniṣads also represent a culmination point in the spiritual search of the philosopher it is mentioned that the self can be realized through an intuitive vision. 'When thought becomes

perfected in intuition then one catches a glimpse of the real'. Thus it is said that 'He attains immortality who intuitively in and through every modification of the mind.'¹⁰

Having reached a satisfactory solution to the problem of personal identity the Upaniṣadic philosophers spread their wings further. They were already in possession of a vast mystical literature embodied in the Vedas. The concept of Brahman had also been arrived at simultaneously during the search for reality from the objective angle. And now when the concept of the self or ātman was arrived at as the essence of being on the subjective side there could only be one solution possible i. e. to identify Brahman and ātman as being one and the same in essence. If Brahman and ātman are essentially the same what is the explanation for the world and the souls inhabiting them are questions which will take us away from the main theme. But what is important is that the notion of personal identity as embodied in the idea of ātman was not confined to this present life alone. According to the Upaniṣads, what 'is' cannot ever be 'is not' or, in other words, 'sat' and 'asat' are opposed to each other as light and darkness. As early as the Māṇḍukyopaniṣad one comes across such statements as 'The unreal (or non-existent) cannot have the unreal as its cause nor can the real be produced from the real. The real cannot be the cause of the real. And it is much more impossible for the real to be the cause of the unreal'.¹¹ The same idea is expressed in the Gītā as, 'of the unreal there is no being of the real there is no non-being'.¹²

Thus, then, if personal identity is something which exists the next question which is to be explained is how can it ever 'not exist'. And since it seems to perish at the time of death the only way to get out of the contradiction is to believe that the self continues to exist even after the fall of the body—'The knowing soul is not born, nor does it die. It has not come into being from any thing nor has anything come into being from it'. This unborn, eternal, everlasting, ancient One, suffers no destruction, even when the body is destroyed.'¹³ By this time the Karma theory had also taken firm roots. The basis for the belief in karma was quite rational too. If, for instance, I can remember only what I have experienced then is it not reasonable to believe that I can only reap the fruits of the deeds I have personally done ? The presence of good and evil in

the world could only be explained, in this scheme, by positing a permanent self which comes into good and bad results in different births as a result of its earlier good or bad deeds. Thus a permanent self, the karma theory and the transmigration of the self from one birth to another were all connecting links in this chain. What must have begun for the Upaniṣadic philosopher as a simple search for personal identity has finally ended in a concept which combines elements of religion, ethics, rationality and mysticism.

These many-sided conclusions of the Upaniṣads with regard to the self were not vigorously questioned till such time as the Buddhist logicians started their attack on the concept of a permanent self. Since, according to the Buddhists, there was no permanent self and everything was a flux, the orthodox philosophical systems were compelled to formulate their theories and arguments in logical terms in order to defend their position. It is not possible to go into the various arguments that commentators like Śaṅkara and others advanced to refute the Buddhist stand. But it will be of academic interest to briefly illustrate the approach adopted by them through some examples. I have chosen only Vedānta as a sample more because it became the most popular in later times.

Thus Śaṅkara in his introduction to the commentary on the Vedānta-Sūtras remarks 'Everyone is conscious of the existence of his own self and no one thinks 'I am not'.¹⁴ 'Even the sceptic who doubts it is also affirming it for it is the essential nature of him who denies it'.¹⁵ These arguments as can be seen, are only a logical reframing of the Upaniṣadic assumptions. That this self is beyond proof is because it is established prior to all proof.¹⁶

Śaṅkara establishes personal identity basing his arguments on recognition, memory and knowledge-experience and repeats the Upaniṣadic dictum that the self is beyond all conceptual modes. The seed of eternality of the self, sown in the Upaniṣads, gets philosophic sanction when Śaṅkara asserts that metaphysically self-existence involves simultaneously the ideas of 'eternity, immutability and completeness' which once and for all established the self as immortal in Indian thought. The personality of Śaṅkara so overshadowed all other thinkers of his time, views came to prevail and continue that to have its hold to this day, even in non-philosophical circles. So much so that even an illiterate Hindu philosophises about the body being perishable

and the ātman being imperishable and inhabiting this body as a vehicle for reaping the fruits of its previous deeds.

Indraprastha College,
Delhi University,
Delhi

T. S. RUKMANI

NOTES

1. Rigveda X 129, 1.
2. Rigveda X 129, 2.
3. Kenopaniṣad Parts (III & IV)
4. Kathopaniṣad 3, 10.
5. Kenopaniṣad 1, 4, 8.
6. Bṛhad Upaniṣad.
7. Bṛhad Upaniṣad.
8. Kenopaniṣad 2, 2.
9. Kathopaniṣad 2, 23.
10. Kenopaniṣad 2, 4.
11. Māndukya Unaniṣad 4, 40.
12. Gītā 2, 16.
13. Kathopaniṣad 2, 18.
14. Brahma Sūtra—Śāṅkara-bhāṣya I. 1. 1.
15. —do— —do— II. 3. 7.
16. —do— —do— —do—