

Buddhism: The doctrine of the non-existence of the soul

The law of change is universal; neither man, nor any other being, animate or inanimate, is exempt from it. It is commonly believed that in man there is an abiding substance called the soul (*ātmā*), which persists through changes that overcome the body, exists before birth and after death, and migrates from one body to another. Consistently with his theories of conditional existence and universal change, Buddha denies the existence of such a soul. But how, it may be asked, does he then explain the continuity of a person through different births, or even through the different states of childhood, youth and old age? Though denying the continuity of an identical substance in man, Buddha does not deny the continuity of the stream of successive states that compose his life.

Life is an unbroken series of states: each of these states depends on the condition just preceding and gives rise to the one just succeeding it. The continuity of the life series is, therefore, based on a causal connection running through the different states. This continuity is often explained with the example of a lamp burning throughout the night. The flame of each moment is dependent on its own conditions and different from that of another moment which is dependent on other conditions. Yet there is an unbroken succession of the different flames. Again, as from one flame another may be lighted, and though the two are different, they are connected causally, similarly, the end-state of this life may cause the beginning of the next. Rebirth, is, therefore, not transmigration, i.e. the migration of the same soul into another body; it is the causation of the next life by the present.

The conception of a soul is thus replaced here by that of an unbroken stream of consciousness as in the philosophy of William James. As the present state of consciousness inherits its characters from the previous ones, the past in a way continues in the present, through its effect. Memory thus becomes explicable even without a soul. This theory of the nonexistence of soul (*Anattā-vāda*) plays a very important part in understanding the teachings of Buddha. He, therefore, repeatedly exhorts his disciples to give up the false view about the self. Buddha points out that people who suffer from the illusion of the self, do not know its nature clearly; still they strongly protest that they love the soul; they want to make the soul happy by obtaining salvation. This, he wittily remarks, is like falling in love with the most beautiful maiden in the land though she has never been seen nor known. Or, it is like building a staircase for mounting a palace which has never been seen. Man is only a conventional name for a collection of different constituents, the material body (*kāya*), the immaterial mind (*manas* or *citta*), the formless consciousness (*vijñāna*), just as a chariot is a collection of wheels, axles, shafts etc.

The existence of man depends on this collection and it dissolves when the collection breaks up. The soul or the ego denotes nothing more than this collection. From a psychological point of view, man, as perceived from without and within, is analysable also into a collection of five groups (*pañca-skandhas*) of

changing elements, namely, (a) form (rūpa) consisting of the different factors which we perceive in this body having form, (b) feelings (vedanā) of pleasure, pain and indifference, (c) perception including understanding and naming (Sañjñā), (d) predispositions or tendencies generated by the impressions of past experience (saṃskāras), and (e) consciousness itself (vijñāna). The last four are together called nāma. In summing up his teachings Buddha himself once said: 'Both in the past and even now do I set forth just this: suffering (duḥkha) and cessation of suffering.