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## THE CONCEPT OF SELF IN EARLY BUDDHISM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO NAGARJUNA

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### Abstract:

*This paper is an attempt at the exposition of the Madhyamikas refutation of the upanishadic and the early buddhistic concept of the self or soul-substance .It also presents the concept of substance as it figures in the Upanishads and the early Buddhism of the Sarvastivada. I also describes Nagarjuna's criticism of the eternalise of the substantial-self.*

### INTRODUCTION :-

Manimekalai is one of the five great Tamil epics (c.2nd AD), the other four being-Cilappatikaram, Cintamani, Valaipati and Kuntalakeci. Manimekalai, authored by Seethalai Sathanar, is regarded as one of the best literary products of the Dravidian genius. It is basically a Buddhist epic which depicts the Buddhist way of living as the sum of bonum of life. It is a didactic epic in that it instructs humankind about the beauty and excellence of the dharma and its desirable fruits. Cilappatikaram and Manimekalai are called twin epics expounding the four purusharthas. While Cilappatikaram is devoted to highlighting the three purusharthas, namely dharma, artha and Kama, Manimekalai is devoted to the narration of the final purushartha, namely, nirvana or moksha.

Women characters are the moving Spirits of the epic Manimekalai. Some of its female characters are the embodiment of the life of spiritual elevation and moral perfection. The epic depicts the attainment of the life of chastity and purity by the lowly women. Manimekalai, the heroine of the epic, born in a community of professional prostitutes and dancers, becomes a Buddhist nun at a very tender age and much against the consternation of her grandmother, Cittirapati and the oppressive social structure. Manimekalai is a girl of exceptional beauty and highly educated in arts. Initiated by her mother, Matavi an accomplished courtesan, Manimekalai embraces Buddhism to lead a life of chastity, perfection and charity. The conversion of the mother and daughter is so strong and sincere that they easily resist all the threats and temptations employed by Cittirapati, to bring them back to their traditional life. Manimekalai, all along the drama, sincerely and ably defeats her grandmother's trials to get her married to the prince Utayakumaran who is deeply in love with her she never entertains the idea of becoming wealthy and famous by marrying the prince. Instead of leading the wicked life of sucking the blood of the rich and indulging in sensual pleasures, Manimekalai chooses to put on a mendicant garb and dedicates herself to social service of feeding the poor by begging alms. She was indeed a revolutionary in opposing her age old culture. Manimekalai is firmly established in the knowledge and understanding of the Four Noble Truths which she learnt from Aravana Attikal, a great Buddhist monk believed to be a professor at Nalanda University in those days. Her understanding of the Buddhist dharma is so clear and comprehensive that the worldly life of wealth, name and fame are loathsome and no more attractive to her. This is evident from the episode of the drama where she rejects the Prince's offer to take her from the nunnery to the palace in a golden chariot.

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Besides refusing the Prince's offer she preaches him the greatness of the virtuous life as enshrined in the Buddhist dharma. She teaches the Prince that it is futile to lead a life given to passions which is filled with misery. She teaches the Prince that it is futile to lead a life given to passions which is filled with misery. She advises him not fall a prey to his passions but work out his salvation by sacrificing the materialistic life of desire and lust. She tells him to obtain release from the bondage of birth and overcome sorrow by following the Buddhist Dharma. The epic depicts Manimekalai as a great Buddhist saint and saviour of mankind..

The drama also glorifies the greatness of Buddhism in comparison with other religions like Brahmanism and Jainism. This fact is brought out in the episode of Cutamati, a Brahmin lady who happens to be molested by a merchant Prince when she is plucking flowers in a garden. Being excommunicated by the Brahmin community, she along with her father leaves their city. After a long search for sojourn they finally happen to approach a Jain hermitage for temporary shelter. But the Jain monks refuse to allow them inside and even deny them alms on the ground that she is molested and unchaste. But ultimately the father and daughter find their secure and safe abode in a Buddhist nunnery. Both Brahmins and Jains treated Cutamati as an untouchable whereas Buddhism welcomed her with respect and honour. Buddhist religion is shown as the saviour of the innocent sinners like Cutamati and helping them to work out their salvation.

Buddhism, like allother systems of Indian Philosophy, except the materialistic school of the Carvaka, regards the phenomenal life [samsara] as being sorrowful. Life as we know as a vicious circle of rebirths perpetuated by craving for renewed existence [bhavatanha]. The sole aim of the Buddha is to liberate man from the cycle of rebirths and the consequent sorrow. The Buddha discovered that the process of rebirth comes to an end only when the craving for existence is exhausted. And he also enunciated that the craving comes to an end only by the clear and deep comprehension of the Four Noble Truths [Cattari ariyasaccani]. The Buddha said, "Existence after existence has had to be gone through in the long stretch of samsara because of lack of understanding of the Four Noble Truths. Thebhavatanha, the craving for existence, which is like a rope dragging one to renewed existence, has been rooted out. The root of dukkha has been cut off without any vestige remaining. Now there will be no more rebirth".<sup>1</sup>

The Four Noble Truths constitute the entire teaching of the Buddha. They embody the truth he discovered about the human existence under the Bodhi tree. The Buddha calls them the dhamma. They are the axioms, the basic postulates from which everything of his teaching logically follows. They are organised version, the classified presentation of his central teaching namely. The law of dependent origination or causation [paticcasamuppada] of suffering and its cessation. They represent the four stages in the process of arising and cessation of suffering. The four Truths are; 1] The most excellent truth of suffering, 2]The most excellent truth of the arising of suffering,3] The most excellent truth of the annihilation of suffering and 4] The most excellent truth of the path leading to annihilation of suffering. The Buddha tirelessly taught thesetruths till the time of his mahaparinirvana. But the teachings left several doubts in the minds of the disciplines and they began to interpret the dhamma in their own ways. Particularly the Buddha's doctrine of non-self [nairatmya] and his silence over the fourteen inexpressible [avyakrta] questions – whether the world is eternal or non – eternal, or both or neither; whether the Tathagata exists after death or does not exist after death or both or neither; whether the individual soul is identical with the body or different from it2. – gave scope for a lot of speculation. The sangha was divided into several school which postulated extreme views [dristis] as answers to these questions and indulged in metaphysics by taking exclusive positions. They could not comprehend the significance of the Buddha's silence as his refusal to be drawn into the net of speculative metaphysics. Consequently they began to expound the teachings in terms of realism, agnosticism, scepticism, and nihilism. The Hinayana Buddhists like Sarvastivadins dubbed the Buddha a radical realist and a transcendental nihilist. They succumbed to the error of clinging to the extremes of eternalism [sasvatavada] and annihilationism [ucchedavada] and perpetuated suffering.

Fundamentally, substance or self has been defined as a self- caused [causasui], an independent and a permanent being. It is an indeterminate and unconditional absolute having a self- nature [svabhava]. It is a being of self– identity [mama], self–hood [atmiya] and individuality [ahamikara]. Substance has also been viewed as an abiding locus or substratum of the ever changing modes or attributes. Remaining numerically one and qualitatively the same amidst diversity is its distinctive character. The existence of the substance is such that it is necessary and does not involve self- contradiction.

The concept of substance looms large in Indian Philosophy. Primarily the concept predominantly figures in the Upanisadic doctrine of the Brahman or the Atman. According to the UpanishadsKutastha, the Atman is the soul-substance which is uncreated, undivided, immutable and eternal ;it is an "infinite entity"<sup>3</sup>. which is self-luminous and omnipresent. The soul is the pure subject the knower, the witness Self [saksin] without an object whatsoever. It is a "homogeneous mass of unchanging consciousness"<sup>4</sup>. devoid of all attributes. The self is unseen [aryavaharya], ungraspable [agrahya] and without any distinctive mark.

The Madhyamika philosophy arose as a trenchant criticism of the eternalism [sasvatavada] of

substance or the self as it figured in Upanishads and the early Buddhism. The Sunyavadins have thoroughly deconstructed, through their dialectic, the substantialistic model of grasping the reality in terms of the extreme views [drstis]. They have firmly established the sunyata nature of the reality which was missing in the uncritical and semi critical ontologies of the Upanishad's and Sarvastivadins or the Abhidharmikas.

Nagarjuna holds that substantialism militates against the dependent arising [pratityasamutpada] or the sunyata nature of things. It wrongly conceives the reality in terms of the extremes of eternalism [sasvatavada] and annihilationism [ucchedavada] and fails to comprehend it in terms of mutual relatedness. Nagarjuna deconstructs substantialism through his dialectic or the logic of sunya 5.. The modus operandi of the dialectic is that it frames the substantialistic thesis against itself by deducing absurd conclusions which the thesis entails. The logic puts the extreme views of the (drstis)substantialism to criticism by formulating them in the form of four possible positions. The four positions [kotis] are; 'is', 'is-not', 'both is and is-not' and 'neither is nor is not'. These extreme positions can be formulated in other terms like self-causation, causation by the other, both self-caused and other caused and neither self-caused nor other-caused, i.e., non-causal.

According to Nagarjuna the second extreme position that the substance is created by something other than itself is also untenable for the following reasons. The substantial entity cannot be said to be caused or created by something other than itself, for fundamentally, and by definition, the substantial entity is independent, absolute and does not require, for its creation, anything other than itself. The substantial entity which is dependent and other-caused ceases to be a substantial entity. Another argument is that the creation of the substance by the other is not possible since the very existence of the other is out of the question. The existence of the other, like that of the self-being, cannot be proved. The other, if it exists at all, should be either self-created or other-created. Since there is neither the self-created nor the other-created, the creation of the substance by the other is out of the question.6. Yet another argument is that the existence of the other would be possible only when the existence of the self were to be possible. For, what is the self for one the same would be the other for another. But the existence of the self is not justifiable, since everything exists in mutual correspondence with others. And from the non-existence of the self, the non-existence of the other follows.7. Since there is no other, the creation by the other is inconceivable.

The third extreme view [drsti] that the substance is both created by itself and the other is not justifiable since the substance as the self-created and other-created has been refused in the first and thesecond positions. This position is illogical, since nothing can be said to be caused at a time by the two mutually exclusive things. Also there can be no entity which possesses as its nature at the same time, two self-contradictory natures viz., the self-nature and the other nature. Two mutually exclusive natures cancel each other and cannot reside in one and the same being. They can never related each other and produce anything8.. Moreover, being a syncretic form of the first two, position is a natural heir to all their anamolies. And the fourth extreme that the substance is caused neither by itself nor by the other is untenable because it implies that things are not caused but happen to be by mere accident [ahetuka]. It ascribes randomness to the orderly and systematic world. This position thus is representative of the irrationalist who fails to see the cosmic nature of the world. Instead of giving a plausible explanation, it explains away the real nature of the world of things and events, physical or mental or both. Thus Nagarjuna dialectically examines the four extreme positions about the concept of substance and establishes that nothing can exit or arise in any of the four ways. No entity can exist by itself, by the other, by both or by neither.9. And anything cannot be said to exist by any way other than the four possible ways examined to be inconsistent.

According to Nagarjuna, sunyata refers to two truths --- the determinate truth [samvrtisatya] and the transcendental truth [paramarthikasatya]. The determinate truths refer to the relational, the co-arising and the mutually dependent nature of things and concepts. Whereas the transcendental truth refers to the indeterminate, the undivided [advaya] and the quiescent [santam] nature of things and concepts in their intimacy. The former is samsara and the later nirvana. The latter is the ground of the former. There is not the slightest difference between the two.10. The determinate truth is not separate from the indeterminate truth but only the 'determinate' ----the relational----form of the indeterminate truth only. It is only the 'appearance' of the unconditioned truth.

## CONCLUSION:

he concept of substances, according to Nagarjuna, is a mental construct; it is a figment of imagination and belongs to the realm of the created; it is unfindable in actual reality which is sunyata.Sunyata, at its two levels, is neither created nor uncrated but a beginning less and an endless interdependence and quiescence of the undivided reality, the truth [tattva], the thatness [tathata] of everything. The concept of substance does not correspond with the sunyata, in any way. Where the one is the other is not. Nagarjuna holds that sorrow [duhkkha] indeed is due to the samsara or the prapancha of

ideas and concepts in exclusive terms. Nagarjuna likens the substantialistic conceptual world to an imaginary city in the sky, the source of illusion and sorrow. But the realisation of the sunyata dispels the whole world of exclusive thought construction and unification. Sunyata itself is the middle path [madhyamapratipad] and the farer on the middle path of sunyata never indulges in conceptual diffusion and substantialistic unification. He uses words and concepts as convenient designations only but never imagines permanent substances corresponding to them. He is always steadfastly mindful of the immortal teachings [sasanamrtam] of comprehending the undivided truth [advayaadharma] in accordance with the eight noes or negations which Nagarjuna expresses in the invocatory of his 11 Mulamadhyamikakarika.

According to the eight noes the sunyata or the thatness is beyond non-extinction [anirrodham], non-origination [anutpadam], non-destruction [annucchedam], non-permanence [asasvatam], non-identity [anekartham], non-differentiation [ananartham], non-coming into being [anagamam] and non-going out of being [anirgamam]. Nagarjuna describes sunyata as being the supreme excellence, the wonderful peace, perfection, and bliss.

Sunyata is not a concept but an actuality to be directly realised by relinquishing all the views and concepts. Conceptualizing or unifying the sunyata is as disastrous as a badly seized snake or a wrongly executed incantation. It destroys the unwise, the people of low insight who grasp it by reducing it to a concept. As Nagarjuna puts it, those who cling to sunyata as an idea are incorrigible victims of irremediable sorrows.<sup>12</sup> As is the sunyata so is the Buddha. He is neither a realist, nor a sceptic, nor an absolutist, nor a nihilist. The Buddha is simply the Buddha, beyond all conceptualisation.

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- 6...Ibid. XXI, 12
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11. Nagarjuna expresses the nature of sunyata in the very first verse of the first chapter of his Madhyamikakarika. In this he also pays homage to the Buddha, the Fully Awakened One, the Supreme Teacher who has taught the Doctrine of relational origination (Pratityasamutpabam) and the blissful cessation of all phenomenal thought constructions (Prapancopasmam, Sivam).
12. Ibid., XIII.8.

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