

## **The Self and the Retention of its Identity after Bodily Death : Overview with The Upanishad**

**Chandrabati Chakraborty**

M.A. (English)

University of Calcutta

### **Abstract :**

The History of discourse has often dealt with the struggling definition of the “*Self*” – the consciousness and the personal identity giving rise to conflicting viewpoints. The primary object of my research paper is to show how the formulations, representations of our past shape the days to come in which the ‘historical sense’ is complicated by the multilayered functioning of Memory. John Locke talks about the ‘memory theory of personal identity’ stating ‘as far as a (a) consciousness can be extended backwards to any past actions or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now as it was then; and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that the action was done....’ but here arises the question – Who IS this “self” ? How does the “self” capture

## **The Self and the Retention of its Identity after Bodily Death : Overview with The Upanishad**

**Chandrabati Chakraborty**

M.A. (English)

University of Calcutta

### **INTRODUCTION:**

The entire issue of personal identity, the survival of the consciousness, its detachment, its workouts, that is the gross concept of ‘personhood’ has always been a major concern of many philosophers for several decades. Though this area is simply huge with lots of complicated networks intertwined together, in this paper I basically wish to work on the concept of the ‘Identity’ of the ‘Self’, the survival of the consciousness of the ‘Self’, the major phenomenon observed by the ‘Self’ and the most crucial issue, the possibility of the persistence of this particular consciousness even after death. And in this entire process, ‘Memory’ no doubt plays a rather significant role.

In an attempt to work on this subject I shall follow a particular pattern. I shall take into consideration both the Western and our Eastern philosophy, Take the help of few excerpts from *The Upanishads*, talk a bit on John Locke’s conceptions on ‘Personal Identity’, consciousness and the Cartesian Mind-Body problem. I would like to focus on the following major issues:

- Personal Identity and the Mind.
- The Memory Criteria and when the Memory fails.
- The psychological Criteria.
- The news of the Soul. ( Persons and Bodies)

And to cover up all these points together I shall present a few case histories, to prove this conception of the pertaining of the regular Consciousness after death.

### **THE MIND AND THE PERSONAL IDENTITY:**

Our understanding of ‘Personhood’ is relative to the frameworks of understanding based on few assumptions. Hence usual propositions made about persons and their identities contain truth-values only within a particular frame of reference, based on these speculations. The pronoun ‘I’ is referred to as the ‘Self’. But here arises the critical question – Who am ‘I’? Who IS this ‘Self’? In ‘*An Essay Concerning Human Identity*’ John Locke gives the definition of the ‘Self’ as “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places’ and continues to define personal identity simply as “the sameness of a rational being”. So long as one is the same self, the same rational being, one has the same personal identity. Now the question that can be formed here is that: Is the ‘I’ of to-day will remain the same ‘I’ some twenty years ahead of time? Of course it is going to retain the same properties, same rational beings, intelligent essences having both reasons and reflections. But the time span being different, the surrounding circumstances being divergent....are the two persons the one and the same? So what does it actually mean to be one unique person, a separate independent individual? Question remains.

One of the most important questions, that comes up while discussing over topics like memory, identity, self --- is that of --- *consciousness*. Many start by questioning the “I”, trying to relate the being, if any at all, to the wider Universe in general. I would like to begin this paper with a *sloka* from *The Upanishad*, which is directly relevant to the mystery, concealment and the also manifestation of the consciousness. It says :

**II Hiranmayena patrena satyaswapihitwng mukhyam**

**Tat twng pushanyapaprinu satyadharmaya dristaye II**

( The Face of the Truth is covered with a brilliant golden lid; that dost Thou remove, O Fosterer of Light, for the law of the Truth, for sight.)

This particular *sloka* reveals the heights of consciousness that were attained by the Vedic and the Upanishad seers. In fact, the Veda which is the earliest composition of humanity, can be regarded as an astounding treatise on the theme of consciousness, identity and memory. We find in that book of knowledge a clear indication of the discovery of all planes of consciousness, right from the inconscient to the higher heights of consciousness. The Veda speaks of three oceans of consciousness – the first is described in a symbolic language as the home of Agni, the origin of which is the plane of Truth-Consciousness, the plane of superconscient, the plane of the Truth, the Right and the Vast ---- Satyam, Ritam and the Brihat. The second ocean of consciousness has been described as the ocean of human consciousness and the third is the ocean of the inconscient. All of these can be observed in the following *sloka* :

## **II Dhamana te biswah bhubana adhisritim**

### **Antam swamudre hridayantarayushi II**

( The superconscient, the sea of the subconscious, the life of the living being between the two – this is the Vedic idea of existence. )

But in spite of so much of theories and philosophies and what not, this very concept of consciousness (identity) remains a mystery. Evolutionary biologist Ernest Meyer writes in 1982, in his widely-read book, “The Growth of Biological Thought” ---- “...the concept of consciousness cannot even be approximately defined and therefore a detailed discussion is impossible.” Even Prof. Keith Ward, the professor of Divinity at Oxford, is of the opinion that consciousness “is a mystery that biology can never solve”.

In order to answer the questions regarding the doubts with the “I”, I shall graze a little over the common accepted notions of ‘Identity and sameness’,

‘mind and the self’, ‘memory and psychological continuity’, trying to give small definitions of few important terms.

**IDENTITY:** It can simply be said to be the relationship that one particular thing bears to itself and its relationship with other objects. Identity is thus ‘unique’. It is what makes a thing what it is, which separates and distinguishes one from another.

**SAMENESS:** It is simply a condition pertaining to the lack of variety to any physical and chemical inheritance of more than on substances.

**PERSONHOOD:** It is the sum total of all the criteria or conditions that an Identity must possess ‘to be a person’, to gain the status of a unique living rational entity that is capable of reflecting its mind. Consciousnesses, freedom of will, ability to use language are the chief yardsticks for an Identity to possess to rise up to the status of Personhood.

In this attempt of knowing the real ‘Self’, let me digress a bit from the Western philosophy to that of our Eastern Vedanta. I would like to quote few slokas from the *Drg Drshya Viveka*, an ancient text of the Vedantic Field, dealing with the notion of ‘Self’, and its consciousness regarding the Seer and the Seen. Though the original lines are in Sanskrit, we need not worry much as we have translations well provided for the matter of understanding. The line goes

***II Rupam Drishyam Lochanam Drk Taddrishyam Drg Tu Manasam  
Drishyaadhibrittaya Sakshi Drigeva Natudrishyate II***

The entire verse operates on one principle – THE SEER AND THE SEEN ARE DIFFERENT. The subject is different from the object, A commonsense that we

accept anyway. The verse says that forms, colours are the seen and the eyes are the seer. For seer and seen to be different they both need to be at some considerable distance away from each other. For example, if one brings a spectacle at the brinje of one's nose, it is definitely not seen, until it is held at some distance away from the eyes. Hence the conclusion the eyes being the seer cannot see itself. Another hypothesis we derive from here is that, things change and the seer being one retains itself while the seen keeps on changing. The seer thus is one while thus seen can be many.

Next when we think deeper, the eyes themselves (that are till now the seer), become the seen and the mind the seer. This is because the mind knows the condition of the eyes, thus it becomes the knower and the eyes become the known. Following the above conditions the knower has to be different from the known and thus we arrive at the conclusion that our mind (the knower) is different from our eyes (the sense organ). Hence the question ---- Who is the Self? Is it the body or the mind that operates the body?

Penetrating even more into the above hypothesis, the mind in due turn becomes the known, the seer because all the major functioning of our minds are known to us. A person is well knowledgeable about his desires, feelings or actions. The mind thus becomes known to something that is presumably the knower. It is this that the Sanskrit terms as **SAKSHI** - the witness – the knower of the mind. And henceforth the witness and the mind are different. Mind being many fold, it is continuously changing while the **SAKSHI** remains unchanged; it simply watches. It is this **SAKSHI** that is the true unique essence of one's 'Identity'. So to call oneself a miserable man or a happy man is an invalid term itself because the very knowledge of the presence of misery or happiness at once distances the mind from the feeling as the seer (the knower) is different from the seen (the known). Hence we derive at the conclusion that bodily identity is strictly not the hardcore 'Identity' of a being. The Sakshi or the witness operates within its essence to grasp the entity of the knowledge of one's existence. In this context we are also reminded of Descartes' mind-body problem that too results from the notion that his mind is

not identical with his body. He claims that, “I am not that structure of limbs which is called a human body”.

### **THE MEMORY AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITERION:**

Having discussed few concepts on personal identity and mind, I would now like to shift my focus on the mental phenomenon, the functioning of memory and the psychological continuity, as they, to a great extent, pertain to our personal identity. In most cases of contemporary discussions on memory, it is often categorized into several types of forms like short term memory, declarative or explicit memory, procedural or implicit memory and the types. However when one proceeds to obtain the truth-value of memories, verification becomes important. But however if a total memory loss occurs, then how do we account for personal identity? For example in case of amnesia a number of things can happen:

- The sense of Personal Identity is destroyed.
- Personal identity is changed to some degree but not completely
- Personal identity sometimes remains unaffected as well.

Let us take the first instance; if the sense of the personal identity is edged out it no doubt deeply affects the memories harboured within one. But does this seeming incident of one’s forgetting about one’s ‘I’-ness really disperse one’s entity? Later if and when the memory comes back to the person –is he not the same unique ‘I’ as he was before? Once again to draw the hypothesis of the seer and the seen we can conclude –the ‘Witness’ knows it all, remains indifferent, survives within with careful detachment. And thus the unique entity is retained in the functioning of the memory.

In the second case, memory criteria are not the chief one but besides it also prevails the claim on bodily identity for determining personal identity. The psychological criteria can be broken down into two fundamental ideas: Psychological continuity and Psychological connectedness. When we speak about psychological continuity, we are referring to the holding of an over-lapping chain

of psychological relations. Similarly, psychological connectedness refers to the holding over time of particular directions. Continuity therefore is a concept concerned with our immediate relations and it can be defined without degrees. Yet connectedness has degrees as these direct relations (memory, character and intention) hold variously different part of our lives.

The psychological criterion, like the memory criterion, is understood as a kind of casual relation. That is, it is posited that memories must be linked to our past in a special way, as in, they must represent our involvement in an actual event. In this way, a casual chain links us to that event. Hence the concepts of continuity and connectedness are the means that explain casual relations for the psychological criterion, sameness of values and of intentions.

Henri Bergson, in his “Matter and Manner” observes : “ Memory, inseparable in practice from perception, imports the past into the present, contracts into a single intuition many moments of duration and thus.....compels us....to perceive matter in ourselves....it follows that memory must be,in principle,a power absolutely independent of a matter.” Hence memory is not just one among the many functions of consciousness, it is as central to it as its intentional illuminating nature is. No perception,emotion or action, infact no cognition or practical life----is possible without some form of memory, since experience takes time and therefore needs to be synthesized. Mention may be made here of the *Garbhoupnishad* which vividly believes that one has died many times before (in the past) and the traces of those ‘experiences’ are significantly retrievable, in the form of *Samaskara* .

## **THE ESSENCE OF THE SOUL:**

At this juncture I now come to the crucial and the most enthralling part of my paper: The concepts of soul searching and relevance of memory related to the topic. The entire theory of personal identity is often argued by psychological scholars as a concept of an immaterial substance, where a few question always arises:



- What is an immaterial substance or rather soul?
- Are persons and soul identical?
- Is it possible to establish personal identity based on the criterion of an immaterial substance?

I shall try to put forward answers to these enquiries with the help of *The Upanishads*. The *Brihadaryanak Upanishad* says ---

**II Swa yatraymentanang neyti jarya boputpta banimanang nigchhati tadythamrng bodhumbrng wa pipplng wa bandhnt prmuchat eamebyng purush evyohngvya suprmuchya prtionyadrbti prnayab II**

( Like the fruits falling from the trees the soul too gets detached from the body and returns to the womb once again for new birth) Thus it is valid that bodily identity in no way can overwhelm or perturb the ‘Soul’.

Now to come to the interesting question—How and what role does the memory play in between the intermission? So let us now move into the province of death, rebirth, soul. Memory and of course ‘Identity’. In *Mundakyaakarika* Acharya Gourapada ( Teacher of Adi Sankaryacharya) has very efficiently distinguished between the conditions of ‘dream’ and ‘awakening’. Just like the Sun sets in the West only to rise in the East; a soul too after getting detached from a particular body moves into a new one. In the process it vehemently disperses the bodily identity but retains the ‘Sakshi’ as we have called it before, the essence (the memory) , a deeper concept that Sanskrit refers to call ‘ Samskara’. The existing molecules and particles of our blood, our body change every alternate seven years, as observed by the medical sciences. But inspite of such major changes we continue to survive, retain our memory. So common logic says when the physical body (the seen) diminishes the seer (the known) carries forth its knowledge without dispersing them. And these carried factors are the ones that constitute the ‘I’-ness of ‘I’.

In order to strengthen my views about this retention of memory after death, I shall move on to provide few examples in the following spaces.

## **I :**

The year 1885 saw the establishment of the ‘Society for the Psychical Research’ in London, to work upon the functions of parapsychological studies where Sir Edmund Garen, Dr.F.W.H.Mayars, Frank Podmore were among the eminent figures. Dr.Mayars the author of *Human Personality and its Survival after Bodily Death* recorded several incidents demonstrating how the memory of a being continues to function even after the psychological destruction of the body.

Dr. Mayars (the former president of S.P.R) himself had promised to return after his death and yes he did that with the help of the known medium- Mrs. Thomson, connecting himself to Sir Oliver Lodge (Principal of Buckingham University of London). There he even mentioned how after death he didn’t even realize the destruction of his body and had felt as if he was lingering in some unknown place with his memories of the present life intact.

## **II :**

The sub-chairman of the American Branch of S.P.R., Dr. Hodgson too had promised to return after the bodily death and he too kept his words by performing that within a lapse of seven days after his death. He could do it through the medium Mrs. Paibur. The President of American Institute of Scientific Research and the Professor of Applied Mathematics of Michigan University Dr. James too kept his word by returning back to his fellow colleagues after death and the entire conversations with him, during the Planchet process was documented and

published in the Newyork Papers, 10<sup>th</sup> December 1911 (by Mr. C.N. Jones). Connections with him occurred for the first time on 22<sup>nd</sup> of October, 1910, evening. I shall like to present a part of his conversation:

I am thankful and honoured to come to human folk who really wants me to come to them. I would like to mention this kind being, standing right beside me, who having left his body, has made it possible for me to use it. I promise not to cause any damage to this physical property of the kind man. I am grateful to him.

So we see, this very bit of information that the soul of the medium steps out of the body of flesh and blood to make space for another soul to take over is a vital proof itself that personal identity is not a bodily thing, though inspite of being a part of the consciousness. That consciousness too isn't a bodily phenomenon and that too is retained along with memory, after death, can be unhesitatingly observed from the above examples. Here I would like to mention the book –*Death, Its causes and Phenomena* by Carrington and Meader where they observe with complete scientific logic how after death the soul is capable of returning to its known people, irrespective of time and spaces.

## **CONCLUSION :**

In this paper I have tried to present how our Eastern Philosophy – The Vedas and The Upanishads have clarified the concepts of life , identity and consciousness. In the Vedantic philosophy “Brahmin” – The Absoloute has three attributes : The Sat (Being) , Chit (Consciousness) and Anand (Bliss). The Advaita Vedanta emphasizes that -- The consciousness is the one omnipotent and omnipresent. Consciousness responsible for the functioning of the body is, according to the *Kena Upanishad* called : “Mind of mind, life of ife, speech of speech, sight of sight and hearing of hearing.” It is that by which the body thinks but which cannot be grasped by the mind, that by which the eyes can see but itself cannot be seen, that which makes the ears hear but cannot be heard by the ears, that which breathes life in a body of mass but which itself cannot be breathed by life. It is that power – The Absolute – the Cosmic Consciousness – The Brahman.

The Soul can suffer no destruction of any kind. We are reminded of the slokas from *Bhagavad-Gita* :

## **II Nainang chedanti shastrani nainang dahati pabakh**

### **No chaining dedyantapyo n shasyati maruti” II**

(Human soul is immortal, it cannot be destroyed by a weapon nor can be burnt by fire. Wind and air cannot make it dry and water can neither wet its essence.)

And as The Upanishad says:

## **II Jatyasya hi dhruba mrittyo II**

(Death is inevitable but nonetheless it is not a complete destruction.)

So this is the consciousness, that retains itself, throughout life and after death as well – a fact rightfully acknowledged by Science and the Vedanta Philosophy. All the energies and the sensical powers that control a particular human body, at the moment of dying all get focused at a particular point of the body while the subtle energies that in most cases have been diminished throughout life now get vibrant in nature. This is the reason why in cases of dying persons, their sense organs (vision, speech, audibility) fade away but often they get to predict the future or tend to remember some long lost memory. Though of course memory and the CNS are vitally interlinked but it doesnt belong to the five senses. The essence of the memory percolates through ‘Identity’ of a being. The knower knows all and the seer gets the view but the known and the seen (strictly speaking the ‘body’) is liable to get destructed while the ‘identity’ having pertained the memory remains.

## **WORKS CITED:**

Swami Avedananda : Life after death

John Locke : An Essay Concerning Human Understanding

Prof Robin Holiday :The Ultimate Aim of Biological Research An understanding of the Human

Prof Arindam Chakrabarti : Matter, Memory and Unity of the self .