

UNITED WISDOM

Ātman and Anātman: Where the Similarity Ends

Traditions and Worldviews

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W-29-N01 · EN

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> *“It is the True. It is the Self”*

Chāndogya Upaniṣad, VI.8.7, fragment; English translation by F. Max Müller, 1879: VI.8. The statement addresses Śvetaketu within an instruction; it is not presented as a position shared by every Indian school.

One can shed a job title, a familiar role, an old account of one's character. What remains afterward? For one teaching, the question leads to a search for a deeper ground. For another, it leads to examining the need to declare anything an ultimate “I.”

About this article

Ātman and anātman are often presented as two ways of saying the same thing: a person is more than their everyday ego. This approximation helps begin a conversation, but soon hides a substantial divergence. Here ātman is examined through particular Upaniṣadic passages, and the Buddhist rejection of a permanent basis of selfhood through philosophical analysis and the dialogue of Questions of King Milinda. We distinguish personal history, the conventional designation of a person, and a claim about an unchanging ground of experience. We show why criticism of superficial self-identification can lead to different conclusions, and why ethical responsibility does not disappear with rejection of a permanent “I.” This is a comparison of selected positions, rather than a reduction of all Hinduism and Buddhism to a single dispute. The practical section offers a close examination of a statement about oneself, preserving the boundary between ordinary reflection and a religious path of liberation.

I. First clarify which “I” is being discussed

The word “I” does several jobs. A person uses it to identify themselves in conversation, tell a story, undertake an obligation, and express an experience. The presence of this word does not automatically imply a theory of an unchanging soul. Yet changing an account of oneself does not refute every philosophical conception of a subject either. The dispute about ātman and anātman therefore begins by distinguishing levels.

The first level is everyday personality: name, biography, relationships, abilities. The second is first-person experience: pain or joy given to someone as their own. The third is philosophical ground: does an unchanging “I” exist that cannot be reduced to changing processes? These

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levels are connected, but not interchangeable. Mixing them turns an argument about impermanence of character into an overly quick conclusion about the whole person.

Ātman is a Sanskrit word with a range of uses; in the Upaniṣadic places considered here it means selfhood, an inner ground. The Pali anattā and Sanskrit anātman indicate the absence or nonrecognition of such a status of selfhood. A particular formula's meaning must be determined within its argument, however. The entire teaching cannot be deduced solely from a word's construction.

A hypothetical example: someone says, “I am no longer the person I was ten years ago.” In ordinary speech this reports changes. It does not mean earlier promises now belong to a completely unrelated being. Nor does it prove that an eternal entity must lie beneath the changes. Philosophical work begins when we ask what the claim of identity is meant to explain.

For comparison, temporarily setting aside “ego” is useful. In popular speech it may mean self-satisfaction, personal boundaries, self-description, or any interest in oneself. Using it for both ātman and the object of Buddhist criticism erases the distinction before reading begins. It is better to name a specific question and reconstruct what each text considers a suitable answer.

In everyday conversation, someone may say of an act, “That was not me.” Sometimes they mean they were unusually irritated. Sometimes they try to evade responsibility. Sometimes they notice a gap between their ideal and their action. These meanings cannot be carried into the philosophical concept of not-self merely because the Russian words resemble one another. None of these remarks alone reproduces the Buddhist argument.

Three levels of the question are useful here. The first concerns self-recognition: do I consider the experience characteristic of my biography? The second concerns appropriation: do I call the event mine, and on what grounds? The third concerns ontology: what permanent entity do I suppose behind the sequence of events? This authorial distinction helps reading, but is not claimed as a general classification of every historical school. Moving between the levels requires its own explanation.

II. The Upaniṣadic search moves toward a ground

In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, the teacher Uddālaka speaks with Śvetaketu about what allows the variety of things to be understood. VI.1 uses examples of a material and the forms made from it; VI.8.7 expresses the connection between the subtle ground of what exists and selfhood through the well-known address to the pupil. This is an inquiry into reality's basis, rather than merely an invitation to raise self-esteem.

The direction of the question matters. What needs understanding is what makes visible diversity possible and how a person relates to that ground. Ātman in this conversation cannot be equated with a set of preferences. Changes of habit do not yet address the claim's subject in the sense in which ground and selfhood are being discussed.

The primary text cannot, however, be turned without qualification into one finished teaching of all Indian schools. The Upaniṣads contain different images and kinds of reasoning, and later interpretation builds different systems from them. Even a translation chooses words that may draw a passage closer to a particular philosophy. It therefore helps to say, “This place proposes this connection,” and discuss the later reading separately.

For a contemporary person, moving from many forms to a ground may be intelligible through the ordinary question of what remains through change. Yet a similar question does not make an everyday answer metaphysical proof. A shared habit across different situations is an observable recurrence, for example; selfhood as the ground of being is a far stronger claim. The sound of “basis” alone cannot bridge the two.

The text invites a search deeper than what first catches the eye. Depth here has a specific content: the relationship of what is visible to that through which it exists. Remove this subject and leave only “be yourself,” and the result may be a useful contemporary phrase, but is not an accurate account of the Upaniṣadic question.

III. Ātman does not coincide with an image of a successful personality

In the Katha Upanisad, I.3.3–9, a person is described through a chariot: body, senses, mind, and intellect have different roles, while ātman is represented as its owner. This image presupposes a distinction between acting parts and the one for whose sake motion takes place. It cannot be reduced to contemporary advice to manage emotions better.

Such a distinction changes the meaning of self-knowledge. Knowing that I like a certain food and prefer working in the morning tells me something about myself in an everyday sense. Yet this knowledge does not answer the question of selfhood in the text under examination. Biographical description and spiritual-philosophical knowledge have different objects, although they may interact in a person's life.

Criticism of a superficial “I” is therefore compatible with affirming ātman. A person may be thought to identify mistakenly with transient qualities precisely because a deeper ground exists. Giving up a title, vanity, or a familiar story need not lead to rejecting selfhood. It may serve a search for what those things do not exhaust.

A difficulty arises when this distinction is used as an easy release from responsibility. A hypothetical “my true ātman is untouched” does not answer who caused harm and what needs repair. A philosophical account of a ground does not abolish relationships in the world of actions. Understanding a particular tradition also requires examining its teaching on action, duty, and the path, rather than isolating one inspiring formula.

Comparison needs to hold two thoughts together. Ātman cannot be considered merely an enlarged everyday ego. Yet this does not make it equivalent to Buddhist anātman. Both positions may criticize familiar identification, but one directs the question toward another ground. The presence or absence of such a ground becomes the central distinction.

IV. Buddhist criticism examines the composition and conditions of experience

Buddhist analysis directs attention to experience's changing constituents and to how a person appropriates them as “mine” or “I.” Section 3 of Mark Siderits's academic article Buddha examines arguments about impermanence and control, as well as the problem of explaining personal continuity without a permanent self. These arguments deserve reading as philosophical work, rather than a slogan about people not existing.

The question changes: what justifies declaring this element the unchanging owner of the others? The body changes, experiences arise and disappear, ideas do not retain one form. Yet rigorous reasoning needs more than a list of changes. We need to ask whether the object sought presupposes permanence, independence, and mastery over experience, then check whether anything with those qualities is found.

This reveals why anātman is not equivalent to ordinarily modest behavior. Someone may be polite while considering their selfhood eternal. They may abandon boasting without changing their metaphysical belief. Buddhist criticism concerns the ground of self-identification; it is not merely criticism of a socially unpleasant character trait.

It should not be presented as a demand to hate oneself either. Rejecting a particular theory is not the same as judging a living person negatively. A philosopher who says personhood has no independent, unchanging core has not thereby said that another's pain is unimportant or promises meaningless. Such practical conclusions need separate justification and may contradict the very path within which the analysis arose.

Comparison with the Upaniṣadic search becomes meaningful precisely here. One line of thought asks what the true self is behind changes. The other examines the basis on which we assign such a status to elements of experience at all. The same dissatisfaction with superficial

self-description directs the question differently. Reducing them to “do not cling to the ego” loses the conversation's most interesting part.

V. Nāgasena's chariot does not seek a hidden passenger

In Questions of King Milinda, book II, chapter 1, §1, Nāgasena invites the king to examine the designation of a chariot through its parts. The name applies when the appropriate composition is present, without requiring a separate object behind it. The analogy explains a person's name and the relationship between designation and constituents. This is a later Buddhist dialogue, rather than a record of a modern conversation or a universal answer of every Buddhist school.

It is especially easy to err by seeing the same chariot as in the Upaniṣad and declaring the two identical. In the first case the image distributes roles within a structure. In the second, examination of parts helps test the status of a whole named by a word. The same pictured object does not guarantee the same philosophical conclusion.

A hypothetical contemporary example examines “team.” No member is the entire team; apart from people, relationships, and joint activity, a separate team is also hard to show. Yet this does not mean teams do not win competitions or do work. A designation can be practically meaningful without a separate, unchanging entity behind it. This is our explanatory example, rather than the historical content of the Buddhist text.

For personhood, the problem is more complex: experience, memory, intention, and responsibility are present. The chariot analogy therefore should not be treated as the final solution to every question about consciousness. It does particular work: it challenges the need to seek a special, independent object where composition and conventional designation function.

The image is useful because it forces clarification of the requirement for existence. Not everything with a name that acts in our lives must exist in the same way. “Conventionally designated” need not mean “meaningless.” Yet it cannot automatically yield a conclusion about the nature of every whole either. The analogy opens philosophical inquiry, and its scope needs preserving.

VI. A similarity exists, but it is limited

Both lines examined can question naive identification with a changing set of qualities. A title, age, mood, and reputation do not give a simple, final answer to “who am I?” In this respect comparison is productive: it shows that criticism of everyday identification belongs to more than one school.

A fork then appears. The insufficiency of changing qualities may be taken to indicate a deeper self. Alternatively, the search for an independent owner may itself be examined as another form of appropriation. These answers differ in the structure of their arguments, rather than their degree of emotional depth. Each position's supporter must explain their own transition.

It is important not to unite the positions through “the witness.” If in one interpretation the witness is an unchanging ground, while another concerns attentive observation of arising processes, the similarity of observing does not establish an identical ontology. “I notice a thought” and “an eternal observer exists” are different claims. The second does not follow from the first without additional premises.

A hypothetical person discovers after a difficult conversation that their anger has passed. They may say, “I am more than this emotion.” In practical terms this is a useful distinction between an episode and an entire life. Yet it does not settle the dispute about ātman. Observation of a changed state is compatible with several philosophical explanations. Personal experience requires interpretation, and interpretation an honest statement of its grounds.

Both lines can be valued as sources of questions without forcing agreement. One reminds us that a familiar self-story does not exhaust inquiry's ultimate subject. The other asks whether our desire for a ground becomes an opaque assumption. Similarity starts the conversation here, while difference preserves each position's ability to affirm and challenge something substantial.

VII. The answer differs, but so does the understanding of knowledge

Vedānta does not form one camp opposite Buddhist denial. William Wainwright's academic overview compares Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita: the former does not attribute internal diversity to ultimate Brahman; the latter retains a personal highest being with good qualities. The dispute concerns the possibility of knowing a reality to which qualities cannot be attributed. Concepts of God, §2, 2007 archive. Within Vedānta itself, the question of the Self is thus already connected with the status of differences.

To understand this fork, consider our own analytical example. We know a thing by distinguishing it from others: naming shape, qualities, relationships. If the ultimate ground cannot be distinguished this way, ordinary definition does not reach its goal. Yet failed definition does not establish nonexistence of the object. The next dispute will concern whether another kind of knowledge is recognized, and how its difference from simple ignorance can be justified.

The reverse difficulty appears if qualities are acknowledged as real. Relationships of knowledge and love can then have an object that remains distinct from the knower. Yet this must be explained in relation to the affirmation of a unified ground. Rejecting differences and including differences in unity propose different tasks, rather than two emotional versions of one idea. Even “knowledge” ceases to be a neutral bridge here: each position must clarify what it allows.

This internal dispute matters for our pair. Every teaching about ātman cannot first be presented as a search for a hidden, unchanging object, and all Vedānta then considered settled through one Buddhist analysis of parts. What the selected position asserts must be established: an object with qualities, an ultimate ground, or another kind of knowledge. The chariot dialogue examined does not automatically answer all three formulations.

We limit the Buddhist side here to the analysis presented by Nāgasena and in the academic reconstruction of the Buddha's teaching. The history of later schools requires other sources. This boundary does not replace content: it allows the divergence already found to be named precisely. In one case unity is sought through a relationship with a ground; in the other, it is examined whether an independent person can be identified among the constituents or apart from them. Further comparison must follow a specific argument, rather than a familiar map of “affirming” and “denying” cultures.

VIII. Impermanence does not release a person from responsibility

If a permanent “I” is not recognized, an intelligible question arises: who answers for an act and receives its consequences? This cannot be dismissed as naive. It shows the work the concept of a person commonly does. A serious answer requires distinguishing an unchanging entity from connections among action, intention, relationships, and later states.

In ordinary life we acknowledge responsibility in someone who has changed. Their character may differ, memories be incomplete, and attitude toward the act critical. Yet they can acknowledge harm and take part in repair. This does not require proving that none of their qualities ever changed. It requires a clear connection with the action and the parties to the relationship.

This contemporary explanation is not proof of the whole Buddhist theory of karma and rebirth. It shows a narrower proposition: change and responsibility do not form an obvious logical contradiction. A religious account requires its own grounds. A cosmology cannot be deduced from an ordinary promise.

Conversely, affirming a deep self does not automatically settle the ethical question either. If a person considers themselves connected with an eternal ground, understanding the consequences of action here and now remains necessary. They gain no right to disregard

another's experience merely because it is called transient. Metaphysical distance and ethical indifference are not the same thing.

Both lines therefore require resistance to a convenient substitution. Anātman should not become an excuse that “there is nobody to answer.” Ātman should not become “the true I did nothing.” Philosophical inquiry can change an understanding of personhood, but does not replace attention to particular harm, an obligation, or possible repair. If a beautiful formula immediately removes all responsibility, its transition deserves checking.

IX. “Not-self” and “not mine”: three different negations

Start with the ordinary phrase “this is not mine.” The speaker may reject ownership, authorship of a decision, or a duty. In all three cases they remain an assumed participant in relationships. A denial of belonging is therefore not yet a denial of the subject. This simple logical example reveals how far a conclusion is sometimes pushed on the strength of an overly short formula.

Now consider “this emotion is not the whole of me.” It denies identity between a particular state and the whole person. Is it compatible with a permanent Self? Possibly. With an understanding of a person through changing conditions? Also possibly. We have a shared refusal to reduce a person to one state, but have not yet chosen an explanation of what makes them a person. Similar practical speech often hides different philosophical commitments precisely here.

The third negation is stronger: no separate, independent owner has been established among the constituents examined or apart from them. Nāgasena's reasoning about the chariot allows this question to be posed to the designation of a person. Dialogue, II.1.1. This is neither an everyday refusal to answer for an act nor “I do not exist.” Naming depends on a combination, but this does not mean the name has lost a clear use. An independent entity and ordinary speech about a person are distinguished here.

This sequence can usefully be compared with the chosen Kaṭha Upaniṣad image. There, the relationship of the owner to the means of the path already participates in the explanation. I.3.3–9. Calling the senses means does not yet deny the owner; the image preserves their role. Looking for an owner as another chariot part already changes the metaphor's conditions. Before judging an identical “not-self,” we must discover what each side excludes and continues to affirm.

Test the distinction on a promise. Someone says their former irritability no longer expresses their attitude toward a loved one. This is a change of self-description. They say they do not consider irritation their unchanging nature. This rejects one explanation. Finally, they assert that no permanent bearer of states exists at all. This is a separate philosophical proposition. All

three sentences may concern one episode, but the first two do not establish the third. Nor does a promise to repair an act disappear at any of these steps.

A negation therefore deserves reading with its object. Is belonging denied, exhaustive identity, or independent existence? Until this is clear, reconciling ātman and anātman comes too easily: precisely what might make the positions disagree is removed from both. After clarification, a serious subject of conversation remains—whether permanence of the ground can be justified, and what counts as a sufficient argument for it.

X. Where reconciliation should stop

The similarity between ātman and anātman ends where criticism of superficial identification becomes an answer about an ultimate ground. If one position affirms it and another challenges that status, the difference cannot be declared merely verbal. This would require a new argument that a feeling of spiritual closeness alone does not supply.

A synthesis of one's own can be offered. It should then be named as an authorial decision, showing exactly what was changed in the initial positions. A synthesis should not attribute agreement to ancient authors who did not express it. Readers have a right to see the cost of reconciliation: what propositions were kept, rejected, or given new meaning.

Leaving the question open is also permissible. Understanding a difference can already be a substantial result. Someone begins to notice when “I am more than my role” means a practical observation and when it becomes a claim about eternal selfhood. They see why an absence of an unchanging core is not an absence of living experience. They hear a philosophical dispute in place of competing slogans.

Attentive comparison does not force a choice of faith from a table. It restores the subject and grounds of each proposition. Accepting it requires further work—intellectual, and for a participant in a religious tradition also connected with its way of life. A short contemporary exercise does not replace this work, but can prepare a more honest question.

After shedding a title and an old description, a person need not obtain one answer. They may ask about a deep basis or start examining the habit of appropriating what arises. These paths touch in refusing to treat the first convenient self-description as final. They then diverge. Preserving this divergence lets both traditions speak meaningfully, and lets us search without a reconciliation made in advance.

What this means in practice

Choose one familiar self-description: “I always argue,” “I cannot ask,” “I am a calm person.” Record two particular episodes where it seems true and one where it does not fit. This is ordinary inquiry into self-description, rather than a practice of attaining ātman or nirvāṇa. Its task is to see what the statement includes and leaves outside.

Then clarify what you call “I” in this sentence. Does it concern a recurring habit, an ethical obligation, a sense of continuity, or a claim to an unchanging entity? The everyday statement probably does not make all these claims at once. Yet the strong word “always” can quietly bring them together. Clarification reduces the weight of what has not been established.

Try two restatements. First: “This quality does not exhaust me.” Second: “This quality arises under these conditions.” They differ. The first preserves the question of what lies behind the quality; the second directs attention to its arising. Both may be useful, but neither alone confirms a metaphysical teaching.

A hypothetical example: someone says they always give way. Examining episodes reveals that they give way to an older relative but argue confidently with a colleague. The new description becomes more specific: “I find it hard to object in these relationships.” Such a change does not require settling the dispute about ātman. It restores differences hidden by a total claim about personality.

End with a question about the consequences of the new description. What can now be noticed or done differently? You may need to clarify a request, choose a time for conversation, or simply abandon an overly rigid label. A small practical result should not be presented as spiritual liberation. It deserves value at its own scale: a person has learned to speak about themselves more precisely and left open what they do not yet know.

Key quotation

> *“it comes under the generally understood term, the designation in common use, of ‘chariot’”*

King Milinda in Questions of King Milinda, II.1.1; fragment from the English translation by T. W. Rhys Davids, 1890: dialogue. This is the king's answer after Nāgasena's questions, then accepted for the analogy with a person's designation. The words are not attributed to Nāgasena as his own remark.

Connections between traditions

These are analytical comparisons; established historical influence is not claimed.

Positions and sources	Actual similarity	Limit of comparison
Katha Upaniṣad, I.3.3–9 and Questions of King Milinda, II.1.1	Both texts use a chariot to clarify the conception of a person.	The chariot's owner and the chariot's conventional designation do different work; the metaphor does not establish a shared teaching about the Self.
Chāndogya, VI.8 and the Buddhist not-self argument, overview §3	Both approaches discuss what can count as a basis of personhood.	Upaniṣadic instruction about the Self and rejection of a permanent controlling “I” diverge on what should be recognized as a ground.
Chāndogya, VI.8 and Spinoza, Ethics, I, definition VI	The philosophical question goes beyond an individual person's biographical image.	Ātman in the instruction and infinite substance in Spinoza's definition are not interchangeable. This compares questions, rather than establishes borrowing.
Questions of King Milinda, II.1.1 and Catechism, §1025	Both positions require clarification of personal identity's meaning.	Conventional designation of a composite person and preservation of personal identity in heavenly communion offer different answers; a shared subject does not erase divergence.
Katha Upanisad, I.3.3–9 and Bhagavad Gītā, XII	Understanding a person is connected with discipline in the relationship to life and the highest.	An image organizing senses and intellect is different from a chapter about devotion and address; belonging to a broad Indian context does not yet make the arguments identical.

Primary sources

• Chāndogya Upaniṣad, VI.1 and VI.8, translation by F. Max Müller, Sacred Books of the East, vol. 1, 1879. The question of a ground and the address to Śvetaketu.

• Kaṭha Upaniṣad, I.3.3–9: The Upanishads, translation and commentary by Swami Paramananda, 1919. Ātman in the chariot image.

• Mark Siderits. Buddha, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, §3. Philosophical reconstruction of criticism of selfhood; not a text of a single consensus across schools.

• Questions of King Milinda, book II, chapter 1, §1: The Questions of King Milinda, translation by T. W. Rhys Davids, 1890. Conventional designation of a person and the chariot example.

• William Wainwright. Concepts of God, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, archived Spring 2007 edition. An example of differences between Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita.

• Benedict Spinoza, Ethics, I, definition VI, translation by R. H. M. Elwes: text. Primary translation; the definition and nearby context were read for an analytical row of the table.

• Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1023–1029. Official self-description; the whole section was read, and §1025 is used for a limit of comparison.

• Bhagavad Gītā, XII, Edwin Arnold, 1885: text. Primary poetic translation; the chapter was read in full to compare two Indian texts.

Tags

ātman, anātman, Self, not-self, Buddhism, Upaniṣads, Vedānta, personhood, identity, impermanence, chariot, Nāgasena, Milinda, Kaṭha, Chāndogya, composition, experience, responsibility, philosophy, liberation, knowledge, translation, comparison of traditions, difference, Spinoza, Christianity, Bhagavad Gītā, primary sources, interpretation, limits of analogy

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