Chapter 5

If I am not the body-mind complex, who am I?

In the light of above discussions a question naturally arises: ‘If I am not the body-mind complex, who am I?’ If body-mind complex is not my ‘self’, is there anything apart from it that is my ‘self’?

This fundamental existential question has been a source of great debate in Indian spiritual tradition right from the Vedic times and numerous philosophies have emerged based on different answers to this query. One of the most commonly accepted response – the so called ‘eternalist’ view – is that within the mortal frame of body exists an immortal self – the soul – which is our true essence. This immutable ‘Self’, the soul, takes up another ‘body’ after death, in accordance with the law of karma (kamma, in Pāli).

And then there are various theories about the relationship of this ‘soul’ to the ‘God’, or the ‘Over-soul’ and the ‘true meaning’ of liberation. A diametrically opposite view, which has been quite popular in the past, (and is quite popular even now in the form of the materialistic view), is the ‘annihilationist’ view, which denies the existence of any such indestructible, immutable self, thus implying that death is the end of consciousness. At the time of the Buddha, there existed a large number of other ‘theories’ too, all of which were rejected by him as mere ‘metaphysical speculations’, a great impediment to the quest for liberation.23

‘... a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. It is accompanied by suffering, distress, despair, & fever, and it does not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation; to calm, direct knowledge, full Awakening, Unbinding.’

The Buddha was also asked such questions repeatedly, in many ways, but he never gave a categorical answer. He termed these as questions which should be put aside24: ṭhapanīyo. In Samyutta Nikāya we have a complete section of discourses titled ‘Avyākata-

23 MN 72  Āgi-Vacchagotta Sutta: To Vacchagotta on Fire
24 AN 4.42  Pañha Sutta: Questions
samyyutta — Undeclared’ wherein a variety of arguments are presented to justify why answers to questions such as ‘whether cosmos is eternal or not?’, ‘whether there exists a soul or not?’, ‘whether an Enlightened One exists after death or not?’ have not been declared by the Buddha. It will be helpful to recall a few of such discourses, to understand the reasons for not giving a categorical answer.

In Vacchagota Sutta25 we find the Buddha giving reasons for putting aside the questions like ‘Is the body the same ...or different...from soul’, ‘Does the Tathāgata exist ...not exist.. after death?’:

’Now, Master Gotama, what is the cause, what is the reason why — when wanderers of other sects are asked in this way, they answer that ‘The cosmos is eternal’ or … not eternal’ …..’The body is the same as the soul’ or ‘The body is one thing and the soul another’ or ‘The Tathāgata exists after death’ or …not exist after death,’ yet when Master Gotama is asked in this way, he does not answer that ‘The cosmos is eternal’ or ‘…..’The body is the same as the soul’ or ‘…The Tathāgata exists ….. or does not exist after death’ ………………?’”

"Vaccha, the members of other sects assume form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form.

"They assume feeling to be the self...

"They assume perception to be the self...

"They assume fabrications to be the self...

"They assume consciousness to be the self, or the self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in the self, or the self as in consciousness. That is why, when asked in this way, they answer that ‘The cosmos is eternal’... or that ‘The Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist after death.’

"But the Tathāgata, worthy and rightly self-awakened, does not assume form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form.

"He does not assume feeling to be the self...

"He does not assume perception to be the self...

"He does not assume fabrications to be the self...

"He does not assume consciousness to be the self, or the self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in the self, or the self as in consciousness. That is why, when asked in this way, he does not answer that ‘The cosmos is eternal’... or that ‘The Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist after death.’

25SN 44.8 Vacchagotta Sutta: With Vacchagotta ;
http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn44/sn44.008.than.html
What is being pointed out is that such questions arise because of the mistaken identification of a being with the five aggregates mentioned earlier. To one who has seen through the impermanent, essence-less nature of these aggregates, and has truly ‘experienced’ their incessant arising and passing away, the illusory nature of the conventional notion of “self” become evident and therefore such questions seem meaningless.

In another discourse 26 where the Buddha remains silent on being specifically asked whether there is ‘self’ or not, he explains to his assistant Ananda, the practical reasons for his refusal to answer this query:

Ananda, if I — being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self — were to answer that there is a self, that would be siding with those brahmins & contemplatives who are eternalists [the view that there is an eternal, unchanging soul]. If I — being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self — were to answer that there is no self, that would be siding with those brahmins & contemplatives who are annihilationists [the view that death is the annihilation of consciousness].

If I — being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self — were to answer that there is a self, would that be in keeping with the arising of knowledge that all phenomena are not-self?*

"No, lord."

"And if I — being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self — were to answer that there is no self, the bewildered Vacchagotta would become even more bewildered: ‘Does the self I used to have now not exist?’"

At another occasion 27 the Buddha counter questions Vacchagotta when he again asks his pet question, to bring out its ‘invalidity’:

….“How is it, Master Gotama, when Master Gotama is asked if the monk reappears... does not reappear... both does & does not reappear... neither does nor does not reappear, he says, ‘...doesn’t apply’ in each case. At this point, Master Gotama, I am befuddled; at this point, confused. The modicum of clarity coming to me from your earlier conversation is now obscured.”

"Of course you’re befuddled, Vaccha. Of course you’re confused. Deep, Vaccha, is this phenomenon, hard to see, hard to realize, tranquil, refined, beyond the scope of conjecture, subtle, to-be-experienced by the wise. For those with other views, other practices, other satisfactions, other aims, other teachers, it is difficult to know. That being the case, I will now put some questions to you. Answer as you see fit.

What do you think, Vaccha: If a fire were burning in front of you, would you know that, ‘This fire is burning in front of me’?*

"...yes..."

"And suppose someone were to ask you, Vaccha, ‘This fire burning in front of you, dependent on what is it burning?’ Thus asked, how would you reply?”

"... I would reply, ‘This fire burning in front of me is burning dependent on grass & timber as its sustenance.’"

"If the fire burning in front of you were to go out, would you know that, ‘This fire burning in front of me has gone out’?”

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26 SN 44.10 Ānanda Sutta

27 MN 72 Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta
"...yes..."

"And suppose someone were to ask you, 'This fire that has gone out in front of you, in which direction from here has it gone? East? West? North? Or south?' Thus asked, how would you reply?"

"That doesn't apply, Master Gotama. Any fire burning dependent on a sustenance of grass and timber, being unnourished — from having consumed that sustenance and not being offered any other — is classified simply as 'out' (unbound)."

"Even so, Vaccha, any physical form by which one describing the Tathāgata would describe him: That the Tathāgata has abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. Freed from the classification of form, Vaccha, the Tathāgata is deep, boundless, hard to fathom, like the sea. 'Reappears' doesn't apply. 'Does not reappear' doesn't apply. 'Both does & does not reappear' doesn't apply. 'Neither reappears nor does not reappear' doesn't apply.

"Any feeling... Any perception... Any mental fabrication...

"Any consciousness by which one describing the Tathāgata would describe him: That the Tathāgata has abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. Freed from the classification of consciousness, Vaccha, the Tathāgata is deep, boundless, hard to fathom, like the sea. 'Reappears' doesn't apply. 'Does not reappear' doesn't apply. 'Both does & does not reappear' doesn't apply. 'Neither reappears nor does not reappear' doesn't apply."

This argument stumps Vacchagotta and he seems to finally realize the futility of such questions. Avoiding explaining his 'position' on such questions the Enlightened One focusses on what is relevant to the fundamental purpose of spiritual path, viz. liberation from all fetters, complete cessation of all unhappiness:

"A 'position' Vaccha, is something that a Tathāgata has done away with. What a Tathāgata sees is this: 'Such is form, such its origin, such its disappearance; such is feeling, such its origin, such its disappearance; such is perception... such are mental fabrications... such is consciousness, such its origin, such its disappearance.' Because of this, I say, a Tathāgata — with the ending, fading out, cessation, renunciation, & relinquishment of all conceivings, all excogitations, all I-making & mine-making & the underlying tendency to conceit — is, liberated through not clinging."

In the light of the above quoted words of the Buddha, we can appreciate the reasons for his refusal to give a categorical answer to the question: 'Is there a self?' Implicit in this question are two assumptions; first the 'self' is the immutable 'essence' of a being, and secondly a rational answer to this question would be either 'yes' or 'no'. The Buddha foresaw clearly the consequences of any direct 'yes-no' type answer to the query. He ensured that his teachings could be verified by all through their direct experience; and so his reply to such questions was very precise: there is no immutable 'self' in the body-mind complex. He dexterously avoided getting into any debate on whether there was any transcendent 'self' outside the body-mind complex, since that would only be a matter of metaphysical speculation, which could never be verified by all.

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28 An example of difficulty in answering a question with implicit assumption: Have you given up committing theft?
What then is the reality of human beings? Why are beings born and what happens to them after death? If there is no “I” who sees, who hears, who tastes, who touches, who smells, who thinks, who dies, who is reborn? Such questions are bound to arise and we shall try to elicit a response to these from the words of the Enlightened One.

To understand this comprehensively, it would be helpful to have a very brief overview of the functioning of human mind as expounded in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. Here the whole of Reality is bifurcated into four segments, viz. rūpa (or materiality), citta (or consciousness), cetasika (or mental factors), and Nibbāna. Citta and cetasika together are termed as the nāma (or mentality) in the Sutta-piṭaka. Nibbāna is the unconditioned element, while the remaining three arise because of conditions. Citta is termed as viññāna in the suttas. It has the function of cognizing. When

‘we’ see or hear something, it is essentially a citta that arises and does the ‘seeing’ or the ‘hearing’. There is no ‘self’ which sees or hears. The cittas arise because of certain conditions; for example, the visual consciousness arises when there is the sensitive eye base, a visual object, light and attention. If any of these is not present – say, for example, the eye base is not there due to blindness, or there is no light, then visual consciousness cannot arise, i.e. there is no seeing. There is no “I” there who sees. The same is true of hearing, tasting, smelling, feeling bodily sensations and even thinking! All these are happening because of the occurrence of necessary conditions for that sense door to operate.

Since rūpa, citta, and cetasika are all conditioned elements, all of these arise because of conditions and pass away immediately thereafter, and this happens at a very rapid pace; millions of such processes occurring within a second! Every citta that falls away, conditions the citta that follows it and thus the character traits are accumulated and habit patterns strengthened. Only one citta

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30 Thus for hearing to arise there should be ear base, sound, medium for transmission of sound and attention, and similarly for other cognitions. Similarly the conditions for other senses to energize can be seen in reference quoted above.
arises at a time, but because of the rapidity with which the cittas arise and fall, we are unable to discern them separately. This gives rise to the illusion that more than one function – e.g. seeing and hearing – are being done ‘by me’ at the same time. The frequency of arising and passing away of citta and cetasikas is much higher than that of the rūpa - typically seventeen mind moments occur within the time span of an arising and passing away of rūpa. All these assertions can be verified by one with a keen, penetrative mind developed through meditation.

In the detailed analysis, various kinds of citta, numbering 89 or 121, are identified depending on the modes of classification. In one of the modes, cittas are broadly classified into two categories: those with roots, and those without roots. The cittas with roots can cause wholesome or unwholesome actions of body, speech or mind, and are therefore further sub-divided into kusala or akusala cittas. Kusala (wholesome) cittas may be rooted in generosity, kindness, wisdom etc. while akusala (unwholesome) cittas may be rooted in greed, aversion, delusion etc. The rootless cittas are also of two kinds – those which arise as a result of past kamma (vipāka cittas) and those which are purely functional. Vipāka cittas themselves can be of two kinds, viz. kusala-vipāka and akusala-vipāka citta, arising from wholesome actions of the past, or akusala vipāka citta arising from unwholesome actions done in the past. Functional cittas are those which facilitate the process of cognition, without actively participating in the actual process, e.g. panca-dhārā-vipaścicitta, the five-door-adverting-consciousness, is the citta whose function is to advert or direct towards the sense door on which the ‘object’ impinges; only thereafter does the actual sense-door-consciousness arise which cognizes the ‘object’.

Citta by itself is said to be pure, luminous capability of cognition, but it becomes ‘defiled’ due to admixture of various mental factors (cetasikas) which arise together with it. In Abhidhamma we also find an in depth analysis of these mental factors and 52 types of cetasikas like vedanā, phassa, cetanā, sati, lobha, dosa, moha, alobha, adosa, amoha, vitakka, vicāra, issā, karuṇā, muditā, etc. have been identified. Seven of these cetasikas, which have no ethical nature of their own, always arise along with every citta, out of the remaining only some would arise depending upon the nature of consciousness. The aggregate sankhāra of the suttas includes all these cetasikas except vedanā and saññā which are themselves identified as two aggregates; the other two being rūpa and viññāna.

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31 Thus for the sense door ‘eye’ the word ‘object’ refers to a visual object, for the sense door ‘ear’ the ‘object’ would be a sound, for the sense door nose the word ‘object’ refers to a smell, for the sense door tongue the ‘object’ would be a flavour, and for the sense door body the ‘object’ would be a tactile object.

32, viz. phassa, vedanā, saññā, cetanā, ekaggatā, jīvittindriya and manasikāra, see footnote 29
Our life is basically an uninterrupted series of cittas arising and passing away; every new citta which arises is strongly conditioned by the immediately preceding citta that has just passed away. This continuity is always maintained as long as we are alive. Every moment of our life, when we are awake, we interact with the world through the six sense organs – i.e. we see an object through eye, hear a sound through ear, smell an odour through nose, taste a flavour through tongue, touch a tactile object through body or think some thought in the mind. The manner in which we respond to the stimuli, determines the nature of the subsequent citta that arises. Thus this process of ‘arising and falling away’ of various kinds of cittas continues unceasingly as long as we are awake or dreaming. During deep dreamless sleep, when there is no ‘activity’ in any of the six senses, the mind reverts to a quiescent state and a stream of consciousness called the called bhavanga citta re-starts. Whenever there is some activity at any of the six-sense doors bhavanga citta stream is interrupted and the consciousness is again conditioned by the sense-door process; and when the sense door processes cease, the stream of bhavanga restarts thus maintaining the continuity of life. The cetasika jīvitindriya which, as mentioned above, is one of the mental factors which accompanies every citta has the function to sustain the life of the citta and the accompanying cetasikas. Being itself a cetasika, it also arises together with every citta and then falls away along with that citta. Thus life faculty is also a conditioned dhamma, which arises and passes away. There are in fact, two different life faculties, viz. a jīvitindriya which vitalizes the nāma (i.e. citta and cetasikas) and another one which vitalizes the rūpa (the materiality, the human body); and both of these are conditioned. Thus, life actually lasts only for a miniscule moment and then falls away to be succeeded by a new life next moment. So, quite literally, death and re-birth are happening every moment. The process of inhalation and exhalation of breath could be figuratively viewed as indicative of the arising and passing away of the life faculty.

The Buddha gave a detailed exposition on how our response to the sensory stimuli is conditioned, and termed it the principle of dependent origination. We shall discuss it fully in the next chapter; here it would suffice to reflect in the perspective of the Abhidhamma upon the first two links in the chain of dependent origination, viz.:

avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā : From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications.
saṅkhārapaccayā viññāṇam : From fabrications as a requisite condition comes consciousness
The first link of the chain - avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā - tells us that due to ignorance saṅkhārā (often translated as mental fabrications, volitional impulses or intentions) get conditioned. Here the reference is primarily to the cetasika ‘cetanā’ or intention. The word ignorance here refers to confusion about the true nature of the Reality and the real causes of unhappiness. As a result, we are completely in the grips of the pleasure-pain principle, i.e. the habit pattern of responding to pleasant situations with craving and to unpleasant situations with aversion which seems to be genetically encoded in human race. Our reactions done under the sway of such craving or aversion create new saṅkhārā through volitional impulses which strengthen our accumulated habit patterns and past conditionings and will produce their result in due course of time.

The saṅkhārā, our intentions, influence what we wish to see, hear or taste, i.e. what we wish to cognize. The state of our mind (consciousness), the quality of our recollections and thoughts is therefore strongly influenced by our intentions – whether these are noble or evil. This is the second link of the chain -- saṅkhārapaccayā viññāṇam

Let us illustrate it by an example. Suppose we were to hear words of abuse. This hearing is the result of a past misdeed done by us, and is an akusala-vipākacitta. If we are imbued with ignorance, we do not understand it in this manner. We take these abusive words personally and blame the person who uttered these. Aversion arises and this in turn conditions the arising of an akusala citta (rooted in aversion) immediately after the initial vipākacitta has fallen. This akusala citta could further lead to unwholesome actions – vocal or even physical. On the other hand, if there is clear understanding, no ignorance, we would not take these words personally. Compassion may arise due to the understanding that the person who has hurled the abusive words must be suffering due to his unwholesome vocal action. This would condition the arising of a kusala citta (rooted in compassion) soon after the preceding akusala-vipākacitta has fallen away which could further lead to wholesome actions, like talking to him compassionately and finding out what prompted him to utter those words.

All our interactions with the world through other sense organs can also be similarly analyzed. Thus whole of our life can be seen as a multiply-conditioned phenomenon rolling on as long as there are saṅkhārā to give momentum to the stream of cittas.

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33 There is no single word in English language that can capture all the nuances of the Pali word saṅkhāra. It etymologically means: that which has been put together, and refers in general to all conditioned phenomena, more specifically to one of the five the aggregates and here it refers to the volitional impulses arising as a consequence of sensory impingement.
A question naturally arises: if at some moment one is not engulfed by ignorance, does not act with craving and aversion, and maintains perfect equanimity, no new saṅkhāra would be created. Would that imply that there would be no new consciousness?

When no new saṅkhāra is created, one of the past saṅkhāra, (carried in the stream of citta in the form of accumulated character traits and habit patterns) would arise – usually in the form of recollection of a memory and/or some physical sensation in the body, leading to some response – and condition the consciousness. If we continue to be imbued with wisdom, and respond to these physical/mental triggers with equanimity – not getting elated when these are pleasant and not getting upset when these are unpleasant in view of the understanding that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent—we are coming out of the grips of the pleasure-pain principle. This is the process by which strongly entrenched habit patterns like irritability, short temper, unwholesome speech, jealousy, acquisitiveness, haughtiness, recklessness, etc. are slowly attenuated; in the dhammic nomenclature it is termed as the process by which the past saṅkhārā are exhausted and the mind is purified. Dhammapada captures this process in these inspiring words34:

“All conditioned phenomena are impermanent”; when one sees this with Insight-wisdom, one becomes weary of dukkha (i.e., the khandhās). This is the Path to Purity.

It thus follows that if the citta stream is completely freed from all saṅkhārā, there would be no conditioning of the stream of consciousness, one would abide in pure consciousness and experience the unconditioned Nibbāna. This is what the Buddha mentions in his exultation soon after enlightenment35:

Visaṅkhāragatam cittam taṇhanam khayamajjhagā which is usually translated as: My mind has reached the unconditioned (i.e., Nibbāna); the end of craving (Arahatta Phala) has been attained.

This phenomenon of arising and passing away of cittas continues even till the very last moments of our life. If there still are some remnant saṅkhāra in the preceding citta, the last citta of the present existence (called cuti citta) will be succeeded by another citta, called the pāṭisandhi citta or the rebirth-linking consciousness. The nature of the rebirth linking consciousness depends on the state of the consciousness just before the cuti citta. If the saṅkhāra which conditioned that consciousness are unwholesome, the pāṭisandhi citta will also be unwholesome, resulting in new birth in an unhappy existence; and if that saṅkhāra is wholesome,

34 Dhammapada verse 277
35 The Dhammapada verse 154.
the paṭisandhi citta will also be wholesome resulting in new birth in a happy existence. Thus there is no ‘self’ that transmigrates from one birth to another, but just the ever changing saṅkhārā carried along by the stream of cittas to which these saṅkhārā themselves give momentum. The Buddha sums up this situation precisely in these words:\footnote{36 SN 12.37 Natumha Sutta.}

This, O Monks, is not your body, nor that of others. You should rather see in it, monks, old deeds (kamma), the result of actions, volitions and feelings in former existences.

Thus rather than answering the question, ‘who I am?’ the Buddha reframes it as: ‘what am I?’ His answer quoted above has been put in a modern idiom by Lama Surya Das:\footnote{37 http://www.tricycle.com/insights/surya-says}

“That which we call “I” is just impermanent, ownerless karma\footnote{38 Karma is the Sanskrit (Hindi) word for Pāli word kamma.} rolling along. Don’t take it personally”

If we effectively disengage ourselves from this ‘ownerless kamma’, not take its manifestations personally, and just remain aware of whatever is happening in the body-mind complex, including the arising of personality view, then gradually the momentum of the kamma is exhausted and eventually it would cease to roll further. There is no further rebirth, no further suffering. That is cessation, which leads\footnote{39} to the experience of Nibbāna. There is the experience, but no experiencer! There is freedom, but no person who is free, for freedom lies in complete extinction of the delusion of personality!

However, as long as we are in the grip of ignorance, we take every experience personally, keep on adding to the kamma, and the stream keeps on gathering momentum leading us unceasingly from death to birth to death to birth. How this happens has been explained in more detail by the Buddha through the principle of dependent origination, which we shall study in the next chapter.

\footnote{36 SN 12.37 Natumha Sutta.}