



**Indian Conceptions of Human Personality**  
(Alan Watts; Karel Werner)

**Vardo Beridze**

Doctor of Philosophy.

Associated Professor at Philosophy Department of  
Batumi Sota Rustaveli State University,  
Georgia, 6010. Batumi, 32/35 Ninoshvili Str.  
+995577145426. vardo.beridze@bsu.edu.ge  
<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1095-3342>

**Abstract**

The interest directed to a person and human being is as old as the history of humankind. The scale of conceptual meaning of a person, its comprehension and study is global. The issues associated with the concept of a person and its structure are studied and discussed by various sciences. They are studied by philosophy, psychology, history, social and political sciences.

Philosophical ideas concerning human beings formed and developed in ancient India and China. Philosophical contemplation of the human being was oriented on investigating the human being's internal nature, the degree of one's freedom, and perfecting the aim and meaning of life, focusing on the primary unity of the macro and micro cosmos, nature and the human.

Attitude to these issues formed in India is characterised by a special perspective which essentially differs from the Western philosophical traditions.

Allan Watts, a XX-century British writer and philosopher who is known as an interpreter of Eastern wisdom thinks that the habits and traditions common to Indian society are rather interesting. In the book „Eastern Wisdom and Modern Life“ he discusses the human

personality as a social or dramatic mask accepted in everyday life and attempts to thus demonstrate the specificity of Indian attitude to the human personality.

As an orientalist and researcher of the philosophy of religion, Karel Werner observes and concludes, that the nature of a human being is still obscure. He thinks that a reasonable definition of the human personality simply states that it has a complex structure and complex dynamic functions.

In sum, the research carried out by both of these scientists concluded that the force supporting everything that exists at the phenomenal level and a human person among them is „Brahman“. According to Brahman a human being himself/herself determines and chooses the way and means for his/her perfection and survival. A human being cannot change the world, he/she can change only oneself.

**Keywords:** civilization of India; person; mask; Brahman; Atman; Alan Watts; Karel Werner.

## **Introduction**

According to the thinking of Indians, it is necessary to analyse several fundamental conceptions, in particular, the ideas concerning the things that form a human being's character, behaviour and the method of self-realization. The theory of a human person is deeply rooted in ancient Indian texts and traditions. It unites philosophical, spiritual and psychological elements, ensures holistic comprehension of human character, and considers a person as a dynamic and developing aspect of an individual's life. According to contemporary philosophical thinking, the Indian tradition fully realizes the difficulties of the problem of understanding the human person and presents the theories of the person which stress the necessity of developing a personalistic philosophy. The article does not claim to have discussed the research topic from various aspects since the problem has a rich history of investigation.

## Method

While analysing the views of twentieth-century British philosopher Alan Watts and a Czech orientalist, and researcher of the philosophy of religion Karel Werner concerning a personalistic understanding of human nature analytical and synthetic methods as well as a comparativistic method were used to study the primary sources and corresponding texts.

## Results

Using analytical, synthetic and comparative methods to study the primary texts created by Alan Watts and Karel Werner, the avowed experts of the oriental philosophy, whose ideas are based on the books of ancient authors, it became evident that the Eastern wisdom contains such ancient and influential attitudes that are still in force in their civilization. The unique attitudes of Indian philosophy are actual at present.

## Discussion

Indian civilization is one of the most ancient civilizations. „If we know anything about this civilization, we do not receive this knowledge from historical sources (historiography did not exist then) but in main from the religious books of unknown authors, created in the ancient epoch“ (Jorjadze, 1989: 586).

It should be noted that metaphysical debates concerning individuals, the nature of the world and our place in it are among the most important issues in classical Indian philosophical tradition. These debates are focussed on the essence of person, I (Atman) or the substance of spirit. The term „person“ is not used in Indian philosophical and psychological thinking in the strict sense of the term; instead, the concept „Svabahaava“ used in the holy books implies all aspects of a perso<sup>55</sup> (5. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3830173/>).

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<sup>55</sup> Svabhaava: the seesnce of oneself: the conception of Svabahaava unites the core of a person. It contains the influences of Purushottama (the supreme truth), I (consciousness and “I” which developed during the human being’s life) and Jiva (immortal soul with the memory of the past and future lives). Understanding Svabhaava is the first step in the development of a person. For the Svabhaava conception see <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3830173/>.

In classic Indian schools of philosophy, it is more difficult to find an equivalent term for a person. In the Buddhist philosophy the concept „Pudgala“ which signifies a psycho-physical complex is translated as a person. There are several terms in Sanskrit, e. g. „Jiva-atma“, „Purusha“, and „Manusia“ which are often used to denote a person, though they have a wider meaning and cannot be used in attitude to persons in their immediate meanings. The concept of a person was the central concept in the classic Indian philosophy (6. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022).

Considering the contemporary opinions, the Indian attitude toward a person implies the following elements: holistic comprehension, spirituality, the transformation of a person, participation of Ayurveda, the ancient wisdom for contemporary life, and cultural and individual variation.<sup>56</sup>

The work is an attempt to analyse the views of the researchers of Indian philosophy Alan Watts<sup>57</sup> and Karel Werner<sup>58</sup> on the idea of a person taking into account the Indian perspective.

Alan Watts in the series of lectures „Recollection“ in his „Eastern Wisdom and Modern Life“ focuses on the idea of Eastern India, namely, on the idea that we have forgotten who or what we are in reality and are trying to restore our self via identifying ourself with an individual person. Watts considers a person or „persona“ as a social or dramatic mask accepted in everyday life. Interestingly, Plato was the first to

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<sup>56</sup> **Holistic attitude:** unites physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. This attitude can help the individuals to more perfectly understand their selves. **Spirituality:** in difference to many western attitudes which are in main focussed on psychological aspects, Indian attitude stresses spirituality. It acknowledges impact of the human being's spiritual travelling on one's personality and behaviour. **Transformation of person:** according to this attitude, individuals can transform their personality by means of intentional efforts, spiritual practice and self-cognition. **Participation of Ayurveda:** such teachings of Indian attitude as Ioga, meditation and Ayurveda are rather actual in the present day accelerated world. They provide tools to improve person's well-being. **Cultural and individual variation:** this attitude recognises that persons can vary according to their culture and individual experience. It respects the variety of experience and expression of the human beings.

<sup>57</sup> Alan Watts, a XX-century British writer and philosopher is known in the Western thinking tradition as an interpreter of Eastern wisdom.

<sup>58</sup> Karel Werner (1925-2019) Indologist, Orientalist, researcher of philosophy of religion.

associate the notion of a theatrical mask with life.<sup>59</sup> Watts speaks about the self-cognition of a human being in general. He thinks that though „our self is the closest to us, it is still difficult to see. We sometimes forget ourselves“ (3.Watts, 1959). He tells us an old tale about an Indian king who wakes up one morning and turns towards the mirror to look at himself. As Watts says one side of old bronze mirrors was polished while the other side was not. In the morning the king took the mirror and looked into it with tired eyes, but he looked into the unpolished side of the mirror and said: „Where is my head? I have lost it!“ He called all his servants and began to run around the house looking for his head. When the servants came, they told him: „But, your Highness, long live to you, your head is on your shoulds as it used to. You are looking into the wrong side of the mirror“. Watts thinks that this story is an illustration of the greatest topic of Indian philosophy: recalling or remembering what humankind seems to have forgotten. When it is said in Indian philosophy that everything aims to remember or recall the forgotten, what does it mean? It means recalling who or what we are in reality. As Watts says, at the beginning, a human being is an actor's mask – whether it be an ordinary dramatic performance or a ritual. These masks, as we have already said, were called personas in the Greek-Roman world. Ancient masks that were made for a Grek-Roman stage looked like megaphones and were made of linen. A person was given the name of mask. As Watts says, this word is still used when in the title of a play we see a list of dramatic persons, e.g. „drama personas“. In the beginning, it was a list of those masks which were to be used by the actors and therefore it is not strange that the

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<sup>59</sup> As it is accepted, the concept of „person“ is linked to the concept of a mask. Greeks called a mask „prosopon“. Nowadays persona is used to denote a reasonable being, self-conscious individual, and perposeful human, who can act freely and is responsible for his/her acts. There are various definitions of the concept of person in history of philosophy. Tertulian was the first to use the word „persona“. As he explained, „God is substance and three persons together“. „Persona is an indivisible substance of a reasonable being“ (Boetius). „You will learn more about a person if you play with him for an hour, than if you talk to him for a hole year“(Plato). „Person is the only reality which we comprehend and which we build form within“ (Mounier) (Грицанов, 2001: 224).

word „human“ which originally meant „mask“ signified that which we really and truly feel to be, explained Watts.

Watts compares a given state of a human being to a certain state of confusion and tries to clarify whether in real life we depend upon and are inclined to fix ourselves through certain roles. Answering this question Watts recalls such an example: when you go to a party and meet numerous strangers there, the hostess introduces you to them and always gives certain hints so that the other person can identify your role. She says: „Oh, I would like you to meet Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith is an artist“, „Meet Mr. Jones, please. Mr. Jones is a banker“. Thus, Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones know who they are. But the thing they know is not precisely what they are in reality, they know what roles they perform in society and because of the knowledge of their roles, they can talk without problems. In other words, you have a starting point for a conversation. It can be something rather trivial, says Watts, because by performing this role you can hide yourself from other humans.

The only exception from this are children who do not need such role keys to communicate, says Watts. A child does not hesitate to tell you „Oh, what a pretty face you have!“ or „Isn't your nose funny?“ A child can enter the conversation without meeting your personality, your mask and therefore, great philosophers and sages always admired children and tried to imitate them in this respect.

As Watts observes, the roles which human beings have in Indian society are castes as we know it now. There is an interesting habit, an interesting tradition in Indian society. This habit or tradition implies, that when a human being settles down in his/her role type at about the middle period of life, he/she passes his/her profession, business, shop management etc on to his/her eldest son and tells him: „Now you continue it“. A human being who gives up his/her job, or rejects his/her role becomes the being that is called „a forest dweller“. He/she surrenders active life, changes his/her name, and refuses his/her role. As Watts shows, in Indian tradition it is called liberation and is denoted by the term „moksha“ which means „become nobody“.

You give up your identifying role. In other words, you leave to find the big question of the whole life: who am I beyond these masks, beyond the roles performed in my life, who am I in reality? We often speak about finding our selves when we discuss our work: am I doing the job I am relevant to? Am I married to the right person? Do I live in the part of the world that suits my nature? Though these questions naturally give rise to the following one: what is the fundamental nature of human beings? And, as Watts says, if you more carefully consider this question, you will begin to get rid of masks or skins and look deeper until you reach the final enigma: what is there beyond all these that is the foundation of my consciousness? What am I in reality? Watts thinks that Induist philosophy always has an answer to this question: beyond plenty of world masks – be they human masks, animal masks, plants, stars or mountains – there is one actor, the supreme I of the world, who is called Brahman. Brahman (Brahma in a personal form) is a name which is given to one actor, who performs all other persons. The deepest „I“ in human beings is called Atman.<sup>60</sup> A great formula of Indian philosophy is the following: Atman is Brahman. What you are, fundamentally is Brahman. You are no longer only a fragmentary individual. So, to go back to Watts's question: what is a human being's fundamental nature? According to the Indian idea, it is Brahman.

Having comprehended everything, Watts explains the essence of the given situation and says that it does not mean that you part with human emotions, that you are not afraid any more, are not sad, do not have to love other people because you see that everything is one and therefore it does not matter. It is not so. Watts resorts to Buddhism and says: „Buddism says that our aim is not to make a stone Budda but a live Budda. A stone budda is a symbol of an ultra stoic human being who suppresses his/her fears and emotions so that nothing is left. But it is not what is implied here. It is implied that you are no more afraid of

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<sup>60</sup> A Sanskrit term „Atman“ which is translated as self, signifies what the essence (Manusia) or psychophysical complex (Pudgala) which embraces mind, body and sense organs of an individual human being should not be.

fear, are no more afraid of grief, pain, or feeling. In other words, you are not afraid to enter life full of joy“. Watts says that according to the Indian idea, we, human beings are not alone in this life (he does not mean a single individual), that behind all our emotions there is a guardian. To prove this idea Watts gives an example of a Chinese Buddhist master, whom one of his apprentices asked „What is Tao?“. „Tao“ in one sense means „a road of nature“. It has almost the same meaning as Brahman. They are the same reality which is the basis of the whole world. „Tao“ also means „the way of life“, or „the mode of behaviour“. Therefore both meanings were implied in his question. What is the ultimate reality? What is the mode of behaviour through which a human being corresponds to it? The teacher answered him shortly: „Just walk“. Watts compares this situation to a policeman who in the street full of people says „Walk along, walk along!“ He thinks that considering everything, walking means retaining life and not blocking it (Watts, 2016:75).

Watts offers one more interesting illustration – the moving of a ball in a stream. Just imagine a table tennis ball in the water: the ball continues dancing, dancing, dancing and it never becomes boggy. It never ceases movement. The ball always instantly reacts to the water movement. Watts recalls a proverb „He who hesitates, is lost“. Buddhist thinking means attachment in the negative sense of the word; an evil attachment to the world. It does not mean love. It does not mean joy. It means blocking love, blocking of grief, and fear. It is the attachment from which a wise man tries to get free (Watts, 2016: 98).

It is clear from Watts' ideas what comprehension of the unity of the world and one's self as involved in this unity would be like. He builds this picture using an Induist dramatic idea of the world and sees the world as a performance in difference to the Western vision which sees the world as a construction. According to the Induist vision, Brahman, and I are hiding from each other. Therefore, according to the Induist position, everyone here is a deity, which intentionally hides to „entertain“. As Watts concludes, it is the main idea which is characterized by simplicity and elegance at the same time.



Applying modern ideas to the ancient Indian principles in considering the problem of a person, it becomes evident that Watts exploits a holistic approach to the problem and engages the attitudes of transformation and spirituality. Watts clearly shows in his works that the main concern of the ancient Indian philosophers was to find the road to helping individuals to set free from sufferings or, at least, to better their present or future lives.

A XX-century Czech Indologist and the expert on philosophy of religion Karel Werner draws similar conclusions and thus strengthens Watts' position. According to Karel Werner, some characteristics of the personality of a human being such as its complexity, continuity and feeling of personal identity accompany a human's life from childhood till old age and constantly challenge him/her that cannot be ignored by philosophers and psychologists. The nature of a human's personality is still not quite clear though as Werner states one thing is evident, namely the fact that a person is a complex structure and carries various dynamic functions (4. Werner, 1996).

Karel Werner discusses the meaning of Brahman and says that immediate comprehension of Brahman makes a human being immortal. Comprehension of Brahman and immortality can be understood as reasonable existence (as a perfect person) without merging with Brahman. He gives such an example: Sage Ianjnavalkia was asked during a public discussion, what is left after a human dies. His answer is the following: „Name, as a name is endless, the endless are all Gods“. „Name“ signifies the structural configuration of this universal divine constituents which make an individual character of a person and corresponds to a wide meaning of Tanu in Vedas. Karel Werner concludes that the force that supports everything existing on the phenomenal level including a person is Brahman. It was stated in the process of looking for the divine essence and source of the world and was identified with Atman which, in its turn was found in the process of looking for the essence of life in general and of individual beings. He thinks that the concept of being or persona is a bridge to understanding the status of liberation.

Karel Werner observes that there is a certain similarity between Indian and Existential understanding of personality, namely, concerning the idea that existence precedes essence.

Based on an in-detail study of Alan Watts' and Karel Werner's works it becomes evident that the foundations of personalistic philosophy can be found at the early stages of the origin and development of Eastern thinking. They show that though the Eastern thinkers do not exclude or reject the unity of a human being, person and individual, they see the cause and reason of this unity only in „Brahman“, and comprehend human beings as a part of the world unity and not as an independently existing being.

Summing up all the above stated, it should be said that the search for ways of human self-cognition and self-realization is a certain core of philosophical thinking. Every epoch posed the problems of a person's self-realization, and the essence of life in its way and gave optimistic or pessimistic answers to them. These issues are actual at present and it means that present-day humans find it difficult to understand their conditions, determine their place and lead meaningful lives. Traditional philosophy considered humans and, correspondingly, personas against the background of transcendental and metaphysical values; the same can be said about the attitude to existential issues (life and death, solitude, freedom, etc.) The present-day human being is a transitory stage between the devaluation of traditional values and the establishment of new ones. A human freed from the transcendental is looking for his/her essential abilities and the road to reach personality. Researches carried out by Alan Watts and Karel Werner offer the ways out of such difficult situations to those who seek methods of improving the being of persona via Eastern doctrines.

### **Conclusion**

Indian attitude toward a person is a treasury of ancient wisdom which offers a unique perspective of developing and realizing a person. Its actuality is proved by those who share the ideas given in it and practice them trying to improve their personality and lead more

balanced and coordinated lives. Eastern teaching contains various methods, among them Yoga in Indian theory, using which humans can change their personalities at any stage of their lives. In China, we have the teaching of Zen which instructs that it is impossible to control the whole life or that it is impossible to fundamentally master one's self. That's why according to these and similar doctrines, humans develop a striving to understand the other world – the world of ideas, as Plato said, or the world of „noumena“ according to Kant. If a human is fully satisfied with the present and gives up any attempts to grasp the unknown, then the human world will resemble a desert and life will become fruitless nothingness.

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