

INDIAN BUDDHIST THEORIES OF PERSONS

Vasubandhu's "Refutation
of the Theory of a Self"

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The Buddha formulated his theory of persons as a part of his theory about what causes suffering and how to destroy this cause. His theory is that the root cause of suffering is that persons give assent to a naturally occurring false appearance of themselves as selves and that they can eliminate this assent by meditating on the selflessness of persons. Section 1 of the Translation contains a brief statement of Vasubandhu's interpretation of the Buddha's theory of persons. According to his interpretation, persons are not "selves" in the sense that they are not persons who can be identified independently of the phenomena that comprise their bodies and minds. He argues that, nonetheless, persons ultimately exist, since they are the same in existence as these phenomena, which do really exist.²¹ Section 2 contains Vasubandhu's objections to the interpretation of the Buddha's theory of persons put forward by the Pudgalavādins. The Pudgalavādins, I believe, may be characterized as the Indian Buddhist philosophers who, while agreeing that persons are not selves in the above sense, deny that persons are the same in existence as the phenomena that comprise their bodies and minds, since they can exist by themselves without possessing any character or identity at all.²² According to Xúanzàng, a Chinese monk who traveled to India in the seventh century CE, about a quarter of the monks in India belonged to the Sāṃmitīya school, which is one of the Pudgalavādin schools. Vasubandhu, following tradition, calls the Pudgalavādins the "Vātsīputrīyas" (followers of Vātsīputra).²³ Section 3 is primarily concerned with Vasubandhu's replies to the Pudgalavādins' objections to his own interpretation of the Buddha's theory. In Section 4 Vasubandhu replies to the objections of the non-Buddhist Indian philosophers he calls the "Tīrthikas" (Forders).²⁴ These philosophers claim that persons are selves in the sense of being substances that exist apart from their bodies and minds. In Section 4, Vasubandhu also presents objections of his own to their arguments for the existence of selves of this sort, which we may call "separate substances." The only non-Buddhist Indian philosophers whose views Vasubandhu considers in Section 4, I believe, are those of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas.

The theories of persons of the Pudgalavādins and the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas

It seems clear that Vasubandhu composed the "Refutation" primarily for the purpose of purging Buddhism of what he took to be the Pudgalavādins' heretical interpretation of the Buddha's theory that persons are not selves. For this purpose, in the greater part of the "Refutation" he presents objections to their interpretation and replies to their objections to the sort of interpretation he himself accepts. He then devotes the last part of the work to replies to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas' objections to his theory. Although his purpose in the "Refutation" is to purge Buddhism of the Pudgalavādins'

heresy, he includes replies to the objections presented by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas, I suspect, because he believes that it may have been their objections that led the Pudgalavādins to reject the sort of interpretation of the Buddha's theory of persons presented by Vasubandhu and to substitute a theory that, as we shall see, closely resembles the one held by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas. The ways in which the theory of the Pudgalavādins resembles that of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas are explained later in this Introduction and in the Commentary.

Our knowledge of the theories of persons presented by the Pudgalavādins and the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas is not exhausted by what Vasubandhu reports in the "Refutation," and a consideration of our other sources of information would be helpful in understanding Vasubandhu's critique of their theories.

One text that scholars believe to be composed from the viewpoint of a Pudgalavādin school and to contain information about its theory of persons is the *Sāṃmitīyanikāya Śāstra*, a pre-sixth century CE treatise preserved only in Chinese translation.²⁵ Since Yaśomitra identifies the Pudgalavādin school with which Vasubandhu contends in the "Refutation" as the Āryasāṃmitīyas, Vasubandhu's opponent in the "Refutation" could be the school from whose point of view the *Sāṃmitīyanikāya Śāstra* was composed.²⁶

The *Sāṃmitīyanikāya Śāstra* is basically a discussion of two questions, one concerning Buddhist views about the existence of persons and the other concerning Buddhist views about the possibility of a transitional state of persons between rebirths. In its discussion of the first question, seven opinions are considered and rejected concerning the existence of persons. The persons concerning whose existence different opinions are considered are "persons conceived from a basis" (*āśrayaprajñāptapudgala*), which seems to be equivalent to the idea that they are persons who are "conventional realities" (*saṃvṛtisatya*-s).²⁷ That the Sāṃmitīyas assume that persons are conventional realities does not mean, however, that they assume them to be conventional realities in the sense in which they are defined in the *Treasury* and *Commentary*. Indeed, in Section 2.1.1 of the "Refutation" the Pudgalavādins are made to deny that persons are conventional realities in that sense. Later in this Introduction I shall take up the question of the sense in which the Sāṃmitīyas, and indeed, all Pudgalavādins, believe that persons are conventional realities. The seven rejected opinions about the existence of conventionally real persons are (1) that although the aggregates exist, persons do not, (2) that persons neither do nor do not exist, (3) that persons really exist (i.e. exist as substances), (4) that persons and their aggregates are the same, (5) that persons and their aggregates are other than one another, (6) that persons are permanent phenomena, and (7) that persons are impermanent phenomena.

After rejecting the above-mentioned seven opinions about the existence of persons conceived from a basis, the Sāṃmitīyas distinguish persons of

this sort from persons conceived from transition and from persons conceived from cessation. Since the basis upon which persons are conceived are the “aggregates” (*skandha*-s), the fact that these aggregates, which are impermanent, form a causal continuum over time enables persons to be conceived as the same persons at different times. Since, as well, the causal continuum of the aggregates that are the basis upon which persons are conceived ceases to exist when “final release from *saṃsāra*” (*parinirvāṇa*) is reached, persons are conceived, even after the continuum of their aggregates has ceased, by reference to the cessation of that continuum. In the “Refutation,” the Pudgalavādins are represented as holding the view that persons are conceived in reliance upon aggregates that belong to them, are acquired by them, and exist in the present. How exactly this view is related to the view, expressed in the *Sāṃmitīyanikāya Śāstra*, that there are these three kinds of persons, will be explained below.

Another work that contains information relevant to an understanding of Indian Buddhist theories of persons has been attributed to the Pudgalavādins by Thích Thiên Châu.²⁸ This work, whose Sanskrit name was probably the *Tridharmaka Śāstra*, seems to have survived only in two fourth century CE Chinese translations. It contains a summary of Buddhist views composed by Vasubhadra and a commentary on the summary composed by Sanghasena. The work as a whole is divided into three parts, which are divided into three sections, which are divided into three topics, etc. Of the basic nine sections, three are concerned with positive qualities the acquisition of which facilitates the attainment of “*nirvāṇa*” (release from *saṃsāra*), three are concerned with negative qualities the retention of which keeps us in “*saṃsāra*” (the rebirth cycle), and three are concerned with the basic phenomena the knowledge of which enables us to attain *nirvāṇa*. Among the negative qualities the retention of which keeps us in *saṃsāra* the following are mentioned: ignorance of phenomena that are “inexplicable” (*avaktavya*),²⁹ and doubt concerning the three “realities” (*satya*-s).³⁰

Inexplicable phenomena, the ignorance of which keeps us in *saṃsāra*, are persons who are conceived in dependence upon (1) the fact that they acquire aggregates, (2) the fact that the aggregates they acquire exist in the past, present, and future, or (3) the fact that they have ceased acquiring aggregates.³¹ If these persons are inexplicable in the sense that persons are said to be inexplicable in the “Refutation,” they are persons who are neither other than nor the same as the collections of aggregates in dependence upon which they are conceived. The aggregates are the substances of which the bodies and minds of persons are composed. The three ways inexplicable persons are said to be conceived are comparable to the three kinds of persons mentioned in the *Sāṃmitīyanikāya Śāstra*.³² We may also assume, I believe, that the Pudgalavādins think that the persons who are conceived in these three ways are conventional realities.

That persons, just insofar as they are conceived, are thought to be conventional realities is not contradicted by the claim, made in the *Tridharmaka Śāstra*, that doubt concerning the three realities prevents us from escaping saṃsāra. Among the realities mentioned there are conventional reality, which is equated with worldly convention, ultimate reality, which is equated with the causally unconditioned phenomenon called nirvāṇa, and the reality that includes all of the causally conditioned phenomena that comprise suffering, the origin of suffering and the path to nirvāṇa. This third reality, which seems to have been called “the reality of phenomena that possess defining characteristics” (*lakṣaṇasatya*), and ultimate reality, so conceived, include all of the substances (*dravya*-s) that are called ultimate realities by those who belonged to the closely allied Vaibhāṣika schools.³³ It seems that in order to retain the motif of dividing topics into three divisions, the doctrine that there are two realities, ultimate and conventional, is redescribed in the *Tridharmaka Śāstra* as three. According to this threefold division of realities, persons will be conventional realities, which are unlike other conventional realities insofar as they are inexplicable.³⁴

In addition to the *Sāmmittīyanikāya Śāstra* and the *Tridharmaka Śāstra*, there are a number of works composed by the Buddhists in which the theory of persons of the Pudgalavādins is presented and criticized. The works included, in addition to the “Refutation” of Vasubandhu, are Moggaliputta-tissa’s *Kathāvatthu* (second century CE),³⁵ Devaśarman’s *Vijñānakāya* (second century CE),³⁶ Harivarman’s *Satyasiddhi Śāstra* (third century CE),³⁷ Asaṅga’s *Mahāyānasūtralamkāra* (fifth century CE),³⁸ Bhāvaviveka’s *Madhyamakahrdayavṛtti*, along with its commentary, the *Tarkajvālā* (sixth century CE),³⁹ Candrakīrti’s *Madhyamakāvatāra* and *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya* (seventh century CE),⁴⁰ Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (eighth century CE),⁴¹ and Śāntarakṣita’s *Tattvasaṃgraha*, along with Kamalaśīla’s *Pañjika* commentary on Śāntarakṣita’s work (eighth century CE).⁴² Among these sources, the *Kathāvatthu*, the *Vijñānakāya* and the *Satyasiddhi Śāstra* were composed before Vasubandhu’s “Refutation” was composed. So it should be to them that we look for antecedents of Vasubandhu’s critique of the Pudgalavādins’ theory of persons.

In the first chapter of the *Kathāvatthu*, an extensive and very stylized debate between the proponents of the Pudgalavādins’ theory of persons and the Theravādin theory is presented. Since it was not composed in Sanskrit, it is not a likely source upon which Vasubandhu draws in the “Refutation,” but it does seem to represent the Pudgalavādins’ theory of persons more or less in the form in which Vasubandhu represents it.⁴³ In the first chapter of the *Kathāvatthu* many of the same arguments used by Vasubandhu in the “Refutation” appear, albeit in a peculiar form, devised to facilitate memorization.⁴⁴ The major thrust of the *Kathāvatthu* critique of the Pudgalavādins’ theory of persons is that conventionally real persons

do not, as they claim, ultimately exist, since they do not exist in the way ultimate things exist, and are not known to exist in the way other ultimate things are known to exist. To exist in the way ultimate things exist, the Theravādins seem to assume, is to exist in the way a substance exists. The Pudgalavādins, of course, do not think that persons exist as substances, but *in the way* substances exist, which is apart from being conceived. To exist ultimately is to exist apart from being conceived. The Theravādins, apparently, do not think that anything possesses ultimate existence other than substances.

The Theravādins themselves surely also believe that in some sense conventional realities ultimately exist. But the ultimate existence of conventional realities, they think, is the existence of the collections of substances in dependence upon which they are conceived as single entities. From this point of view, their main criticisms of the Pudgalavādins' theory of persons are that if conventionally real persons are neither other than nor the same in existence as collections of substances, they do not possess ultimate existence, since they are neither substances nor collections of substances, and are not known to exist since they are not known to exist in the way substances are known to exist. So understood, their main objections to the Pudgalavādins' theory of persons are basically the same as those put forward by Vasubandhu in the "Refutation." Their objections, however, are more difficult to understand because of the convoluted form in which they are presented.

The other major issue taken up in the *Kathāvatthu* concerns how, if inexplicable persons ultimately exist, they can be, as the Pudgalavādins claim, neither the same nor different in different lives. Vasubandhu does not discuss the Pudgalavādins' claim, that persons are neither the same nor different in different lives, but he does criticize their claim that the only way to explain the convention that persons are reborn is to suppose that they are inexplicable phenomena.

In the second chapter of the *Vijñānakāya* a debate between the Pudgalavādins and their opponents is represented. The arguments of this chapter are similar to, but simpler than, the arguments of the first chapter of the *Kathāvatthu*. If Vasubandhu studied the *Vijñānakāya*, however, his study did not have much influence on his argumentation in the "Refutation," which is much more extensive and more carefully articulated. In the *Vijñānakāya* the arguments primarily turn on questions about whether or not the Pudgalavādins' theory of persons is consistent with the Buddha's different classifications of persons, about whether or not it can explain the relationship between persons in one of their rebirths and these same persons in another rebirth, and about whether or not it is consistent with the Buddha's classifications of phenomena. In the "Refutation" Vasubandhu totally ignores arguments of the first kind, but does include arguments of the second and third kinds. He first concentrates upon

questions of the internal consistency of the Pudgalavādins' theory, and then upon scriptural refutations, after which he takes up their objections to his own theory.

The arguments in Sections 34 and 35 of the first chapter of the *Satyasiddhi Śāstra* are much more like those in the "Refutation" in a number of important respects. The English translation and paraphrase by N. Aiyaswami Shastri contains some of the same basic arguments used by Vasubandhu and the Pudgalavādins in the "Refutation," although they are formulated slightly differently and occur in a slightly different context and order. In fact, some of the same quotations from the Buddha's sūtras are employed. In Section 34 a series of scriptural objections is advanced against the Pudgalavādin theory that a person is inexplicable, some of which Vasubandhu employs in the "Refutation." Then in Section 35 a number of Pudgalavādin arguments for the existence of an inexplicable person are presented and objections to these arguments are posed.⁴⁵ But the arguments in these sections are not so rigorously formulated as they are in the "Refutation." Nonetheless, the strong similarities between some of the arguments in these sections and arguments in the "Refutation" suggest either that Vasubandhu was familiar with the *Satyasiddhi Śāstra*, that the author of the *Satyasiddhi Śāstra* was familiar with Vasubandhu's examination in the "Refutation," or that both examinations were based on an earlier examination that has been lost.

The later polemical treatments of the Pudgalavādins' theory of persons, for the most part, seem to draw upon Vasubandhu's "Refutation" or upon these other earlier treatments. Indeed, La Vallée Poussin often calls attention in the notes to his translation of the "Refutation" to similarities between its arguments and the arguments in these later works. Except for the arguments in Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra*, which are directed against theories of persons of the sort held by Vasubandhu and the Pudgalavādins, and for the arguments in Śāntarakṣita's *Tattvasaṃgraha*, along with Kamalaśīla's commentary on them, which call attention to the most basic issue involved in the dispute between the Pudgalavādins and their Buddhist critics concerning the existence of inexplicable persons, I will not be concerned here with these later developments, which is a topic that cries out for special study.

Among more recent secondary sources, relatively brief discussions of the Pudgalavādins' theory of persons are presented by Edward Conze, Nalinaksha Dutt, S. N. Dube, and L. S. Cousins.⁴⁶ More extensive treatments of the Pudgalavādins' theory of persons are to be found in Thích Thiên Châu's *The Early Literature of the Personalists* and Leonard Priestley's *Pudgalavāda Buddhism*. Although I have consulted all of these secondary sources in my attempts to clarify the debate between Vasubandhu and the Pudgalavādins, and I have found all helpful in different ways, I failed to find in them what I consider to be clear philosophical

accounts of the theories of persons of the Pudgalavādins and their Buddhist critics, and hence, a clear philosophical understanding of what exactly the debate is about.

The key to understanding their different theories of persons and the philosophical issues involved in the dispute between them, I believe, is that Vasubandhu and the Pudgalavādins actually agree that persons are conventional realities that ultimately exist, but disagree about the form in which persons ultimately exist, and so, about what can and cannot be a conventional reality. That they agree that persons are conventional realities I concluded from my study of the surviving works of the Pudgalavādins themselves and their early Buddhist critics. I found Priestley's *Pudgalavāda Buddhism* to be especially helpful to me in the process of arriving at this conclusion.⁴⁷ That Vasubandhu and the Pudgalavādins agree that conventionally real persons ultimately exist was finally called to my attention when I realized that the major criticism of their theories by the philosophers belonging to the Mādhyamika (middle way follower) schools of Indian Buddhist philosophy is that they assume that persons ultimately exist.⁴⁸

The only non-Buddhist theory of persons Vasubandhu seems to discuss explicitly in the "Refutation" is that of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika school of philosophy. Although nominally distinct, the Vaiśeṣika and Nyāya schools of philosophy are usually treated as a single school, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika school, whose metaphysical views are most often presented by the Vaiśeṣikas and whose epistemological and logical views are usually presented by the Naiyāyikas. The root texts of this school are Kaṇāda's *Vaiśeṣika Sūtras* (sixth century BCE) and Gotama's *Nyāya Sūtras* (sixth century BCE).⁴⁹ Vasubandhu is likely to have studied the theory of persons presented in these seminal works, as well as the elucidation of the Vaiśeṣika theory of persons by Praśastapāda in his *Padārthadharmasaṃgraha* (second century CE)⁵⁰ and the elucidation of the Nyāya theory of persons by Vātsyāyana in his *Nyāya Bhāṣya* (second century CE).⁵¹ In Gotama's *Nyāya Sūtras* the principal arguments for the existence of a self occur in Book I, Chapter 1 and in Book III, Chapter 1. In Kaṇāda's *Vaiśeṣika Sūtras* the principal arguments occur in Book III, Chapters 1 and 2.⁵² Readers will find a study of these texts very helpful for an assessment of Vasubandhu's replies to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika school objections to his theory of persons and his own objections to their theory. There are, moreover, a number of later treatises that develop the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika arguments for the existence of the self that may be consulted for elaborations of the objections of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas to the sort of theory of persons presented by Vasubandhu.⁵³

The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas claim that, from the point of view of their ultimate reality, persons are "selves" in the sense of being permanent and partless separate substances, and that, through contact with an internal organ (*manas*), these selves become conceivers of objects. By means of becoming

conceivers of objects, they acquire characters of a kind only such entities can possess and begin to function as agents of bodily motion. The existence of selves is known by means of a correct inference from the existence of the characters and agency they possess. In Section 4 of the “Refutation” a variety of arguments used by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas to prove the existence of selves are presented, many of which are made the basis of objections to Vasubandhu’s theory of persons. Although consciousness of objects is made a proof of the existence of selves, it is not thought that selves are by their own natures conscious of objects. The practical goal of the practice of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika philosophy is to free persons from consciousness of objects, since suffering is the inevitable consequence of consciousness of objects. But in India, among those who identify selves with owners or possessors of consciousness and agents of bodily motion, the essentialist viewpoint predominates. The Jains, Pūrva Mīmāṃsās, Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedāntins, and Dvaita Vedāntins all hold versions of the theory that selves by their own natures are conscious of objects and are agents of bodily motion.

Another non-Buddhist theory of persons to which Vasubandhu alludes, according to Yaśomitra, is that of the Sāṃkhya. The basic text in which the Sāṃkhya’s theory of persons is presented is the *Sāṃkhyakārikas* (fifth century CE), which is attributed to Īśvarakṛṣṇa. In verses 17–20 of this work, proofs of the existence, nature, and number of selves are presented.⁵⁴ Although this text may have been composed about the time Vasubandhu composed the *Treasury*, the doctrines it contains are quite ancient. So we may assume that Vasubandhu is familiar with the theory of persons it contains, even if he does not openly criticize it in the “Refutation.” The Sāṃkhya claim that there are just two basic kinds of substances. The first kind is a “self” (*puruṣa* or *ātman*), which they believe to be a permanent and partless consciousness that is a subject that can exist without an object, that can exist without an owner or possessor, and that cannot itself be made an object of consciousness. The second kind of substance is an unmanifest form of “matter” (*prakṛti*) that, for the enjoyment of selves, causes itself, by combining its three causally inseparable fundamental “constituents” or “qualities” (*guṇa*-s) in different ways, to evolve into different kinds of objects for subjects to witness. The first of these evolutes is an agent “intellect” (*buddhi*), which causes itself to evolve into “a mind that conceives an I” (*ahaṃkāra*), which mind, in dependence upon how its own causally inseparable three constituents are combined, causes itself to evolve into many other kinds of objects for selves to witness. The practical goal of the Sāṃkhya philosophy is for persons to become free from the illusion that they are objects of consciousness. The Sāṃkhya’s pluralistic version of selves as permanent and partless instances of pure consciousnesses is later transformed by the Advaita Vedāntins into a theory according to which every self is in the last analysis one universal permanent and partless consciousness that is identical to “absolute reality” (*brahman*).