

# Abhidharmakosa Study Materials

## Chapter IX: *Pudgala-viniscaya* (Study of the Person)

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### Basic outline of Chapter IX

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(Chapter IX appears to have been added to the Bhasya as a kind of appendix. The Kosa-karika came to a formal close at the end of Chapter VIII. Chapter IX refutes various theories of a soul or self, focusing mainly on the teachings a Buddhist school that held to a conception of the person (*pudgala*) neither different from nor identical to the *Skandhas*. The chapter consists almost entirely of detailed arguments. There are a few expositions (especially of memory) that complement the systematic presentation of the teachings in Chapter I-VIII. The Sarvastivadin system is not a concern of this chapter. Chapter IX concludes with three karika, affirming the significance of the teaching of non-self to Buddhism and genuine liberation.)

**Overview:** Also known as *Pudgalaviniscayah* “An Examination of the Person”, this chapter has a different structure and purpose than the first 8 chapters, which consist of *karika* (verses) with auto-commentary (*bhasya*), expounding the interpretation of the Vaibhasika Sarvastivadins and including the criticism of the Sautrantikas on a number of key points. Chapter IX seems to serve as a kind of appendix. The *Bhasya*, in two places (pg 650: Ch IV, K73a-b & pg 818: Ch V K27b-c), makes reference to this chapter, but it is not integral to the presentation in the first 8 chapters. Ch IX consists of prose with a few closing verses at the end. The main thrust of this chapter is the refutation of views of the person as either not identical (but also not apart from) the 5 *skandhas* (aggregates) (this is the view of the Buddhist Pudgalavadins, who had a considerable following in India), or as substantially different from the 5 *skandhas* (this is the view of the non-Buddhist “Tirthikas”). There were earlier works on this topic that may have influenced Vasubandhu. Harivarman’s *Satyasiddhi Sastra* has a number of arguments quite similar to what Vasubandhu presents here. The Theravada *Kathavatthu* contains similar arguments against the Pudgalavadins as well, although this was probably not a direct influence for Vasubandhu. The account below follows the interpretation of James Duerlinger’s “Indian Buddhist Theories of Persons.” The debate with the Pudgalavadins demonstrates the struggle of the tradition as to what is meant by the teaching of no-self (*anatman*) in relation to our sense of being a person. The subject of this chapter is ultimately our sense of how it is that we exist, and do not exist, which is one of the most basic orientations to life and meaning and a path of practice.

### Terminology:

*Anatman* 無我 – Non-self, selfless. Buddhist schools agree that all phenomena are selfless. The Kosa teaches the selflessness of persons; all things are empty of self in being empty of being possessed by a self. What is a self? A person that can be independently identified, that is, a person that can be conceived without depending on the *skandhas* (all the attributes of mind & body). *Anatman* is one of the aspects of the 1<sup>st</sup> Truth of suffering, the object of liberating knowledge (Ch VII).

*Satkayadrsti* 有身見 – View of self (and what pertains to self), mistaken cognition of “I” and “mine”. One of the 10 primary *anusayas* (Ch V).

*Pudgala* 補特伽羅 – Person. Referentially, what we refer to by “I”, “she” etc. Descriptively, what possesses the *skandhas* (form, sensation, conception, formations, consciousness). In the Buddhist context of *anatman*, persons may exist, as they are not selves (not independently identified). Vasubandhu & the Pudgalavadins both agree that persons are conventional realities formed in dependence on the series of *skandhas* (past, present & future), that when we conceive ourselves, we naturally appear to be independently identifiable, and that believing this appearance to be true is a root of suffering.

*Santati-parinami* 相續-轉: Transformation of the series (or continuum). The *skandhas* as an uninterrupted causal continuum explains continuity: how we are the same person at different times, and how we change over time and in each moment, but do not cease to be persons. The Pudgalavadins rather propose that the apparent success of the conventional reality of the person is based on persons being, inexplicably, underlying supports of the *skandhas*, and thus we are neither the same over time (persons are not substances) nor different (persons are not the ever-changing series of *skandhas*).

*Skandhas* 五蘊: Aggregates, heaps. The 5 *skandhas* subsume all conditioned phenomena in 5 categories: *rupa* (material form), *vedana* (sensation), *samjna* (idea or conception), *samskara* (formations), and *vijnana* (consciousness). The 5 *skandhas* are a way to account for all experience without the supposition of a separate self or soul. We can see in this teaching the concern to account for karmic cause and effect in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> *skandhas*: the 4<sup>th</sup> *skandha* has been defined as *cetana*, intention, which is the definition of karmic cause, the 2<sup>nd</sup> *skandha* (sensation) embodies karmic effect. (& see Ch III.K18)

### Views of the Person (*Pudgala*):

Vasubandhu [Sarvastivada & Sautrantika]: No self exists separate from the 5 *skandhas*. The Person is the 5 *skandhas* and the *skandhas* are real. In this sense, we ultimately exist. Persons are not substantially real entities but substantially established entities. Not substantially real because persons are conceived (conventionally) in dependence on the *skandhas*, but substantially established because the *skandhas* are real. Persons are the same in existence as the *skandhas*.

Pudgalavadins [view of a number of Buddhist schools at the time]: The person is not separate from the 5 *skandhas*, but also not identical. The person is not a separate substance but is nevertheless real. Neither different from, nor being the same in existence, as the *skandhas*, the Pudgalavadins adopt the view that the person is inexplicable. The person is conceived in dependence upon the aggregates, but is not identical to them. The person acquires the aggregates and the ceasing of the aggregates. Persons are separately existent entities without separate identities.

Tirthikas: [non-Buddhist teaching] A person or self is a substance, substantially real entity, separate from the *skandhas*. This includes anyone who explicitly teaches a self here (Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, etc.). Persons are separate substances.

Madhyamaka [Mahayana Buddhism, only mentioned in passing, Nagarjuna’s work was well known]: Selflessness of persons and things. The root of suffering is not just believing in self as separate substance apart from the *skandhas*, nor merely believing in the gross false appearance of a self that is independently identifiable, but assent to a subtle false appearance of ourselves as possessing ultimate existence in the sense of existing by ourselves, apart from being conceived. Selflessness then means lack of ultimate existence. For Vasubandhu, this is nihilism because no ultimate existence means no causal efficacy, and thus nothing could happen. In contrast, the Madhyamaka hold that the actual contradiction is that what has ultimate existence could not perform a causal function. Persons are merely mentally constructed phenomena existing in dependence on the *skandhas*, which themselves only exist conventionally.

**Section I. Opening:** Vasubandhu opens by stating that there is no liberation outside of the Buddha way because “other doctrines are corrupted by a false conception of a soul.” Believing in a soul or self as a substantial entity leads to the production of defilements, rather than liberation. Rather, the self is merely a continuum of the aggregates, a series of *skandhas*. There is no direct perception or correct inference that can establish the existence of some other self or soul (apart from the *skandhas*), and Vasubandhu does not admit other means of knowing.

## **Section II. Vasubandhu’s Objections to the Pudgalavadins:**

a) **The Basic Dispute:** Vasubandhu and the Pudgalavadins agree that persons are conventional realities that ultimately exist, but disagree about the form in which persons ultimately exist, and in turn, about what can and cannot be a conventional reality. Pudgalavadins assert that in addition to phenomena that are conditioned & unconditioned (*samskrta/asamskrta*), impermanent and permanent (*anitya/nitya*), the 12 *ayatanas*, the 18 *dhatus*, etc., there are, in addition, phenomena that are inexplicable (*avakrtavya*). For the Pudgalavadins, conventional realities may be substantially established (as they are for the Vaibhasikas) or inexplicable. Inexplicable entities are entities without separate identities – they are neither the same as, nor different from, the *skandhas*. The Pudgalavadins reject the logic that everything is either substantially real or substantially established. Inexplicable persons are conventional realities insofar as they are conceived in dependence upon the *skandhas*, but ultimately exist insofar as they exist apart from being conceived. Persons are single entities without separate identities, an inexplicable unity. Vasubandhu does not reject the view that persons ultimately exist. Conventionally real persons do ultimately exist by virtue of being a series of *skandhas*. What Vasubandhu rejects is the notion that persons are inexplicable phenomena, rather persons have the same existence as the *skandhas*. What is at stake in the debate is what forms of existence are recognized and how that plays out in one’s conception of a person. The basic attitude of Vasubandhu, and others, toward the Pudgalavadins is that in their theory of persons, it can appear that the person is substantially real, despite attempts by the Pudgalavadins to refute this attribution.

b) **Fire and Fuel:** The Pudgalavadins introduce the notion that persons are conceived on the basis of the *skandhas* as fire is conceived in reliance upon fuel without being other than or the same in existence as fuel. Vasubandhu then argues against this interpretation of the relationship of fire and fuel and in turn the notion, that persons exist inexplicably. Vasubandhu points out that both the fuel and the fire are composed of 8 elements (4 primary elements + 4 derived elements, see Ch II, K22), and that the existence of the fire and the fuel are established from the same basis, and that there is no need to see the existence of the fire as inexplicable.

c) **How is the Person Known:** The Pudgalavadins maintain that the person is perceived through an inexplicable perception incidental to a consciousness perceiving its proper object. It is an inexplicable perception because it is neither the same nor different from the perception of the object. Vasubandhu again argues against such a notion, pointing out problems with this notion of inexplicable perception: By which of the 6 consciousnesses is a person known to exist? The Pudgalavadins respond that the person is inexplicably perceived by any the 6 consciousnesses while itself not being perceived directly by any of the 6. If the person is perceived at the same moment as a visible form, how could the person be distinguished from the visible form? How then can the distinct existence of the person be asserted? Furthermore, perception is not inexplicable, perception is a causally conditioned phenomenon.

d) **Appeals to Sutra Teachings:** Thus far, Vasubandhu has been arguing through reason to demonstrate the logical incoherence of the Pudgalavadin view (in relation to the system of Kosa). He then moves to arguing through appeals to Sutras to demonstrate that the Pudgalavadin view is in contradiction to the teachings of the Buddha.

## **Section III: Vasubandhu’s Replies to the Objections of the Pudgalavadins:**

The Pudgalavadins introduce a number of problems that seem to arise from the teaching of no-self, which they feel can be accounted for by their view of the person. If persons are the same in existence as the *skandhas*:

1. How can Buddha be omniscient?

Vasubandhu’s response: Buddha can know, without error, anything merely by directing attention to it.

2. How can persons “bear the burden” (of suffering)?

Vasubandhu’s response: The “bearer” is a verbal convention, not permanent and not inexplicable.

3. How can the person be “spontaneously” born in other worlds?

Vasubandhu’s response: A Sutra says the aggregates are spontaneously born.

4. How could Buddha say that he is “One person born into the world for the welfare of many?”

Vasubandhu’s response: The use of “One” here is figurative.

5. Why did Buddha not answer the “unanswered questions” (including the question of whether the person is the same as or different from the body)?

Vasubandhu’s response: Buddha takes into consideration the questioner (and what they need to hear) & their false assumptions (an answer to the question affirms the premise (the existence of a person) of the question).

6. How can the person wander in Samsara (how can their be rebirth)?

Vasubandhu’s response: a) But how then does your notion of the person wander? and: b) Just as a momentary series of fire “moves”, so the person wanders in Samsara based on craving [see Ch III, K18 “As an example, the lamp”].

7. How can persons remember past lives?

Vasubandhu’s response: When Buddha recounts past lives, it is merely recounting the continuum of the *skandhas*.

#### Section IV Vasubandhu's Replies to the Objections of the Tirthikas:

Vasubandhu then brings in the non-Buddhist view of the person as a separate substance, here attributed to the "Tirthikas", "Here, also, the incorrigible fault is that there will be no liberation." Vasubandhu may be giving special attention to some of these objections because they are related to the objections to *anatman* raised by the Pudgalavadins above. Furthermore, he may also be attempting to create an association between the Pudgalavadins and the non-Buddhist Tirthikas in order to further discredit the Pudgalavadin position as a Buddhist stance.

1. If there is no self, and as all minds are momentary, how can there be memory of an object?

Vasubandhu's response: Memory arises from a mind that is causally connected to a prior discrimination of the object to be remembered.

2. If there is no self, who remembers? Who possesses the memory? Who possesses the consciousness of the object?

Vasubandhu's response: The "agent" grasping the memory is nothing other than the occurrence of the memory, no separate act or agent of grasping is required. In these instances, there is no relation between an owner and what it owns other than the relation between a cause and its effect (and the cause need not be a self, a substantial entity).

3. If there is no self, how can one walk and observe an object?

Vasubandhu's response: A person is a collection of momentary phenomena causally conditioning other phenomena in an unbroken causal continuum. There is no need to grasp a self as the cause underlying the person's arising in different places over time.

4. If there is no self, how can consciousness apprehend an object?

Vasubandhu's response: A consciousness actually does nothing at all. Consciousness apprehends an object because it receives a form like that of its cause. Its like a flame that is moved to another location – all along it is a flame, arising in a momentary serial continuity.

5. If there is no self, how can different kinds of consciousness arise (the same consciousnesses or some fixed order of consciousnesses would always have to arise)?

Vasubandhu's response: Consciousnesses are causally conditioned phenomena and it is a defining characteristic of causally conditioned phenomena to differ in kind from moment to moment. A mind can actually give rise to different kinds of mind depending on the impression and the assemblage of other mental factors present. Transformation is a characteristic of the mental series. "The causes of the variety of material things are difficult to know; how much more difficult is it to penetrate the variety of causes and conditions of non-material things, minds and mental states!"

6. If there is no self, how can the mind conceive an "I"?

Vasubandhu's response: The mind conceives of an "I" that is the same in existence as the *skandhas*. The conception of an "I" is caused by defiled mind that has as its object its own continuum of *skandhas* and it is conditioned by previous minds which had conceptions of an "I".]

7. If there is no self, how can there be an underlying support in which pleasure and pain come to be?

Vasubandhu's response: There is an underlying support of pain and pleasure: the 6 bases of perception. They come to be an underlying support the way that flowers come to be in a tree.

8. If there is no self, how can there be an agent of actions and a subject who experiences the result?

Vasubandhu's response: Actions of body depend on actions of mind and actions of mind in turn depend on a prior mind that itself arises in dependence upon its causes and so on. There is no need to insert a substantially existent self as the cause of action at any point. A separate self contributes nothing to the arising of an action. Similarly, there is no need to posit a substantially existent separate subject who experiences the result (no need to posit a self that possesses consciousness or results, etc.)

9. If there is no self, how can action produce a result in the future?

Vasubandhu's response: A result arises from an action because of a special development in the continuum of the action. In the same way, a fruit arises from a seed. We say that a fruit arises from a seed, but not that it arises from a seed that no longer exists or that a fruit arises immediately from out of the seed itself. "Series, or *samtana*, means the material and mental *skandhas* succeeding without interruption in a row which has an action for its original cause. The successive moments of this row are different: there is then evolution (*parinama*), or transformation of the series. The last moment of this evolution possesses a special efficacy, the capacity of immediately producing the result: it is distinguished, in this regard, from other moments; it is then termed *visesa*, or the ultimate moment of evolution" (Pruden, pg 1353). "This is a coarse explanation in accord with my [limited] understanding. How [the] continua [of aggregates], when perfumed by actions of different kinds and strengths, give rise to their [characteristic] results is understood [completely] only by the Buddhas" (Duerlinger, pg 110).

#### Section V Concluding Verses:

In conclusion, Vasubandhu again affirms that Buddha teaches selflessness and that it is only this teaching that can free us from suffering, in contrast to the misguided interpretation of the Pudgalavadins. He also expresses the hope that what he has explained in this treatise will spread and serve to protect and purify the Sangha.

**Legacy:** Despite Vasubandhu's efforts, the Sammitya school (which included the Pudgalavadin conception of a person) persisted at least through the 7<sup>th</sup> c. Vasubandhu's treatise itself was the subject of critique by Chandrakirti (7<sup>th</sup> c.) in his explication of a Madhyamaka theory of the person, in which neither the person nor the *skandhas* ultimately exist.