

The Literature of the Pudgalavādins, by Thích Thiến Châu

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by *Thich Thien Chau*

In the course of a long history, Personalism (*pudgalavāda*) was a remarkable aspect of ancient Buddhism. Buddhist in origins and inspiration, it was, in fact, a markedly original doctrinal deviation—and engendered an important community that lasted more than ten centuries, from the third century B.C. to the ninth or tenth century A.D.

The Personalist sect consisted of the mother sect, the Vātsīputrīya, and four sub-sects: Sāṃmitīya, Dharmottarīya, Bhadrāyānīya and Śaṅṅagirika. These sects flourished: they had a great number of monks and monasteries, and a considerable doctrinal influence on other Buddhist schools, both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna. Not adhering to the doctrine of substancelessness (*anātmavāda*), they were attacked and condemned as heretics (*tīrthika*) by a number of opposing schools.

The literature of the Pudgalavādins is almost entirely lost. Pudgalavādin communities eventually were assimilated by others, and we can learn of their position almost exclusively through the writings of their adversaries. Fortunately, we do have, in Chinese translations four authentic works from the Vātsīputrīya and Sāṃmitīya traditions. These are:

(1) The *San-fa-tou louen*^a, *Tridharmakaśāstra* (Treatise on the Three Laws), is fifteen pages in length and comprises 223 questions and answers (*Taishō* [hereafter T.] XXV, no. 1506, pp. 15c-30a). It is a systematic exposition of essential doctrinal points found in the *āgamas*. The treatise is titled as it is because it deals with three elements of the doctrine: the good (*kuśala*), the bad (*akuśala*) and the basis (*aśraya*). The author is Chan-hien,^b the commentator Saṅghasena, and the translator Gautama Saṅghasena, who made the translation in 391 A.D. The

treatise probably is Vātsīputrīya, since it deals primarily with the concept of *pudgala*.

(2) The *Sseu A-han-mou tch'ao-kiai*.^c This commentary on excerpts from four *āgamas* takes up fifteen pages in T. XXV, no. 1505, pp. 1b–15b. The original title is *San-fa-tou*^d (The Treatise on the Three Laws), whose reconstruction also is *Tri-dharmaśāstra*. This text probably had the same original text as the *San-fa-tou louen*, because its content is similar. The author is Kin-hien,^e the date of composition and the commentator are not mentioned. The translator is Kumārabodhi, who made the translation in 392 A.D.

(3) The *San-mi-ti pou louen*,^f *Sāṃmitīyanikāyaśāstra*, is the title found in the Chinese translation (T. XXXII, no. 1649, pp. 462a–473a), though the treatise has another title: *Yi-chouo louen*^g (*Āśrayaprajñaptiśāstra*). This title probably reflects the contents of the work, most of which is an attempt to explain the theory of the *pudgala*. The name of the author, the translator and the date of composition are not mentioned. The translation is supposed to be from the Chin dynasty^h (385–431 A.D.). It is impossible to attribute this text to the Sāṃmitīyas, because of (a) the alternate title of the treatise, (b) the concept of an indestructible entity (*avipranāśa*), and (c) the list of the fruits of a śrāvaka, all of which indicate the presence of notions not associated with the four sub-sects.

(4) The *Liu eul-che-eul ming leao louen*.ⁱ This treatise of 22 stanzas explains the Vinaya. It is titled as it is because within its 22 stanzas it encompasses all the essential concepts contained in the *Vinayapitaka*. It is found at T. XXIV, no. 1461, pp. 665b–673a. The author is Fou-t'a-to-lo-to^j (Buddhatrāta?), and the translator Paramārtha (500–569 A.D.). The dates of composition and translation are as yet unknown. The treatise almost certainly originated with the Sāṃmitīyas, as indicated in the text.

A study of the four texts available to us reveals three fundamental topics: the *pudgala*, the fifteen secondary theses, and the two Pudgalavādin lists of śrāvakas. These will be discussed in turn.

I. The Three Designations of the Pudgala

The *pudgala* can be designated in three ways: (a) The *pudgala* designated by the bases (*āśrayaprajñaptapudgala*), (b) the *pudgala* designated by transmigration (*saṅkramaprajñaptapudgala*) and (c) the *pudgala* designated by cessation (*nirodhaprajñapatapudgala*).

(a) The *pudgala* designated by the bases is the designation of a person conditioned with reference to its basic constituents, or aggregates (*skandhas*). In effect, the *pudgala* designated by the bases, or the *pudgala*, is something more than the combination of its constituents. It is the essential factor that unifies a person's life processes. Stated otherwise, it is the *pudgala* that appropriates and sustains a body for a certain amount of time, and which constitutes the same person from conception to death, and then extends through other lives. The *pudgala* is like a single person wearing different outfits. The fact of personal continuity points up the cause-effect relation obtaining between successive stages of life. The specific relation between the *pudgala* and the basis (or aggregates) is explained as the continuity of a single person that is independent of others. There is continuity (*santāna*), so there is a possessor of continuity (*santānin*). According to the Pudgalavādins, to deny the possessor of continuity is to deny continuity.

It is the *pudgala* that constitutes the person who carries a certain name, lives a certain time, suffers or enjoys the consequences of its acts. This, then, explains how a person has no connection with the sensations and thoughts of others. The persistence of the person provides the basis of memory and consciousness. If such a person did not exist, then how could memory and consciousness arise, or, for that matter, recollection? The frequent explanation is that memory derives from from impressions (*vasanā*) formed by the aggregate of mental formation (*saṃskāraskandha*) and kept in the consciousness (*viññāna*) skandha. This would be impossible if there were no personal continuity, because the aggregates of mental formation and consciousness are instantaneous. Memory could not thus arise unless there existed that which remembers.

According to the Pudgalavādin, for there to be knowledge, there must be a constant subject who experiences and accumulates experiences. For example, there must be a Devadatta for Devadatta to accumulate wealth. If there were no *pudgala* who was the “recipient” of experiences, how could knowledge be formed? The *pudgala* is not only the agent of memory—a part of the aggregates of mental formation and consciousness aggregates—but also the agent of sensations (*vedanā*) and perceptions (*saṃjñā*). Thus, to deny the existence of this *pudgala* would deprive human action of all meaning. According to the Pudgalavādins, on the other hand, the designation of the *pudgala* offers a possibility of resolving the problems of existence and of the person.

The *pudgala* is one of the five “knowables”: the first three are conditioned things (*saṃskṛta*) found in the three times, past, present and future; the fourth is the unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta* or *nirvāna*); and the fifth is the *pudgala*, which cannot be unconditioned because it relates to conditioned things. In other words, the *pudgala* is neither identical with the aggregates (*skandha*) nor different from them. Thus, the *pudgala* belongs neither to the *asaṃskṛta* nor to the *saṃskṛta* category. It is a designation (*prajñapti*) whose characteristics cannot be defined; it is a special category created by the Pudgalavādins:

| | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| All things (dharmas) | | |
| <i>saṃskṛta</i> | | <i>asaṃskṛta</i> |
| 1-3: things in the three times | 4. the <i>pudgala</i> | 5. <i>nirvāṇa</i> |

(b) The *pudgala* designated by transmigration (*saṅkramaprajñaptapudgala*) is a designation correlated with three sub-designations: the designation of the past (*atītaprajñapti*), the designation of the future (*anāgataprajñapti*) and the designation of the present (*pratyupannaprajñapti*).

These explain (i) how personal continuity, being an uninterrupted flow of psycho-physical phenomena, not only flows in the present, but has its source in the past and continues to flow into the future, and (ii) how personal karmic responsibility is possible, such that Buddhism no longer is susceptible to the charge that it is nihilistic and immoral. In fact, the *pudgala* bears a force that traverses the flux of existences, and acts and receives retribution according to a universal moral justice—this is the *raison d'être* for good actions.

(c) *The pudgala designated by cessation (nirodhaprajñaptapudgala)* is another corollary designation, the purpose of which is to demonstrate that the Tathāgata or an arahant, after attaining the nirvāna without remainder (*nirupadhiśeṣanirvāna*), or *parinirvāna*, is the liberated person *par excellence*, dwelling in beatitude.

Thus the *pudgala*, with its three designations, is an ineffable (*avaktavya*) that avoids the two extremes: annihilation (*uc-ceda*) and eternity (*śāśvata*). The *pudgala* is the agent of knowledge, memory, the rebirth process, the ripening of actions (*karmavipāka*), and, after eliminating its obstacles, dwells in beatitude.

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|---|
| P U D G A L A | the life of } a being } | human + intermediate state + other lives + + + + + + + + | a liberated being in nirvāna or <i>parinirvāna</i> |
| | knowledge, } memory, etc. } | + + + + + + + + + + + + + + | the omniscience of a Buddha |
| | actions and } results } | + + + + + + + + + + + + + + | the bliss of nirvāna or <i>parinirvāna</i> |

The creation of the theory of the *pudgala* represents a reaction against the “depersonalization” of the *ābhidharmika* tradition. The Pudgalavādins, on the other hand, tried to preserve the essence of the doctrine of substancelessness (*anātmavāda*). The theory of the *pudgala* has been misinterpreted by the polemical literature; nevertheless, it offers much of doctrinal interest to Buddhist thinkers.

II. The Fifteen Secondary Theses

The fifteen secondary theses are:

- (1) There exists an indestructible entity (*avipraṇāśa*).
- (2) There are twelve knowledges on the path of seeing (*darśanamārga*).
- (3) There are four stages in the concentration of access: patience (*kṣānti*), name (*nāma*), notion (*saṃjñā*) and the highest worldly dharma (*laukikāgradharma*).
- (4) Clear comprehension (*abhisamaya*) is gradual (*anupūrvā*).
- (5) The five supernormal penetrations (*abhijñā*) can be obtained by ordinary beings (*prtagjana*) or heretics (*tīrthika*).
- (6) Morality (*śīla*) designates (actions of) body (*kāyakarman*) and speech (*vacīkarman*).
- (7) Merit (*puṇya*) is accumulated continually, even during sleep.
- (8) It is impossible to say whether the characteristic of phenomena (*dharmalakṣaṇa*) is permanence or impermanence.
- (9) There is an intermediate dhyāna (*dhyānāntara*) between the first and second dhyānas.
- (10) There is only one absolute: nirvāṇa.
- (11) There are five, six or seven destinies (*gati*).
- (12) Knowledge (*jñāna*) also can be called the path (*mārga*):
- (13) An arahant is susceptible of falling from his attainment.
- (14) There is an intermediate state (*antarābhava*) in the sensuous realm (*kāmadhātu*) and the form realm (*rūpadhātu*), but not in the formless realm (*arūpyadhātu*).
- (15) There are seventeen categories of celestial beings in the form realm (*rūpadhātu*).

Among these fifteen secondary theses, the first, second and tenth are the most remarkable.

The first thesis is that established by the Sāṃmitīyas to complete the theory of *puḍgala* by explaining the mechanism for the retribution of actions. The indestructible entity (*avipraṇāśa*) continues to exist throughout the flux of existences, and is the essential base for the accumulation and maturation of karma.

The second thesis demonstrates that the path of seeing

(*darśanamārga*), according to the experience of the Pudgalavādins, is practiced and penetrated through twelve knowledges gained through meditation on the four noble truths relative to the three realms:

| | | |
|---------------------|---|---|
| I. <i>Duḥkha</i> | { 1. <i>Dharmajñāna</i> 2. <i>Vicarajñāna</i> 3. <i>Ajñātajñāna</i> | } <i>Kāmadhātu</i> <i>Rūpadhātu</i> + <i>Arūpyadhātu</i> |
| II. <i>Samudaya</i> | { 1. <i>Dharmajñāna</i> 2. <i>Vicarajñāna</i> 3. <i>Ajñātajñāna</i> | } <i>Kāmadhātu</i> <i>Rūpadhātu</i> + <i>Arūpyadhātu</i> |
| III. <i>Nirodha</i> | { 1. <i>Dharmajñāna</i> 2. <i>Vicarajñāna</i> 3. <i>Ajñātajñāna</i> | } <i>Kāmadhātu</i> <i>Rūpadhātu</i> + <i>Arūpyadhātu</i> |
| IV. <i>Mārga</i> | { 1. <i>Dharmajñāna</i> 2. <i>Vicarajñāna</i> 3. <i>Ajñātajñāna</i> | } <i>Kāmadhātu</i> <i>Rūpadhātu</i> + <i>Arūpyadhātu</i> |

The tenth thesis indicates that the Pudgalavādins, faithful to the sūtras in the same way as the Theravādins, recognized only one *asamskṛta*, although they had to develop the theory of the *pudgala* to account for the existence of living beings.

These are the fifteen secondary theses that distinguish the doctrines of the Pudgalavādins—especially of the Vātsīputriyas and Sāṃmitīyas—from those of other early Buddhist schools, especially the Theravādin and Sarvāstivādin.

III. The Two Pudgalavādin Lists of Śrāvakas

The list in the *Tridharmakaśāstra* consists of 27 categories. The list in the *Sāṃmitīyanikāyaśāstra* consists of ten or twelve categories, with that of the arahant undivided. The first list, of 27 categories, is divided among three stages: nine categories of the stage in which desire is not yet eliminated (*avītarāgabhūmi*), nine categories of the stage in which desires are eliminated (*vītarāgabhūmi*), and nine categories of arahant:

I. AVĪTARĀGABHŪMI

AṢṬAMAKA

1. *Śraddhānusārin*
2. *Prajñānusārin*
3. *Śraddhāprajñānusārin*

SROTAĀPANNA

4. *Saptakṛdbhavaparama*
5. *Kulaṃkula*
6. *Madhyama*

TANUBHŪMI

7. *Sakṛdāgāmin*
8. *Ekabījin*
9. *Madhyama*

II. VĪTARĀGABHŪMI

ŚRADDHĀDHIMUKTA

1. *Ūrdhvasrota*
2. *Sābhisamskāraparinirvāyin*
3. *Anabhisamskāraparinirvāyin*

DRṢṬIPRĀPTA

4. *Antarāparinirvāyin*
5. *Upapadyāparinirvāyin*
6. *Ūrdhvasrota*

KĀYASĀKṢIN

7. *Sābhisamskāraparinirvāyin*
8. *Anabhisamskāraparinirvāyin*
9. *Upapadyāparinirvāyin*

III. ARAHANT

TĪKṢNENDRIYA:

1. *Sthitākamṣyadharman*
2. *Prativedhanādharman*
3. *Akopyadharman*

MRDVINDRIYA:

4. *Parihāṇadharman*
5. *Cetanādharman*
6. *Anurakṣanādharman*

MADHYENDRIYA:

7. *Prajñāvimukta*
Ubhayatobhāgavimukta:

8. Complete
9. Incomplete.

When one compares this list with those in the Sarvāstivādin *Abhidharmakośa* and the various Pāli Theravādin texts, it is clear that the Pudgalavādins formed their own systematization of the śrāvaka-fruit, one that is reasonable and suggestive. Presumably, through this systematization they wished to underline the fact that adhering to the theory of the *pudgala* did not prevent one from attaining the path or liberation.

IV. Summary

In sum, the personalist sects' creation of the theory of the *pudgala* was a doctrinal revolution that provoked divisions among Buddhist thinkers and Buddhist communities. Because we have lacked original sources, the Pudgalavādin position has usually been derived from the often unfair accounts of its opponents. Thanks now to the investigation of four authentic Pudgalavādin works, we can appreciate the unique creation of the Pudgalavādin masters, who had to face numerous difficulties in searching for a solution to the problems raised by such basic Buddhist doctrines as substancelessness (*anātmavāda*).

Pudgalavādin literature is as yet little known and little studied. With the few documents at our disposal, we have been able to arrive at some preliminary findings, and hope that more may emerge in the future.

Note

This paper was presented at the fifth conference of the IABS, at the University of Oxford, in August 1982, as a summary report on my two theses: "Le *Tridharmaka-śāstra* (Étude philologique et doctrinale)," and "Les sectes personalities (Pudgalavādin) du Bouddhisme ancien." The two theses, under the direction of Prof. A. Bareau, were submitted to the Université de Paris III (Sorbonne) for the Doctorat de IIIe Cycle (1972) and Doctorat d'État ès Lettres (1978), respectively. The article has been translated from the French by Prof. Roger Jackson.

Chinese Terms

- a. 三法度論
- b. 山賢
- c. 四阿含暮抄解
- d. 三法度
- e. 三法度論 今賢
- f. 三彌底部論
- g. 依說論
- h. 秦
- i. 律二十二明了論
- j. 弗陀多羅多