

From Abhidhamma to Abhidharma:

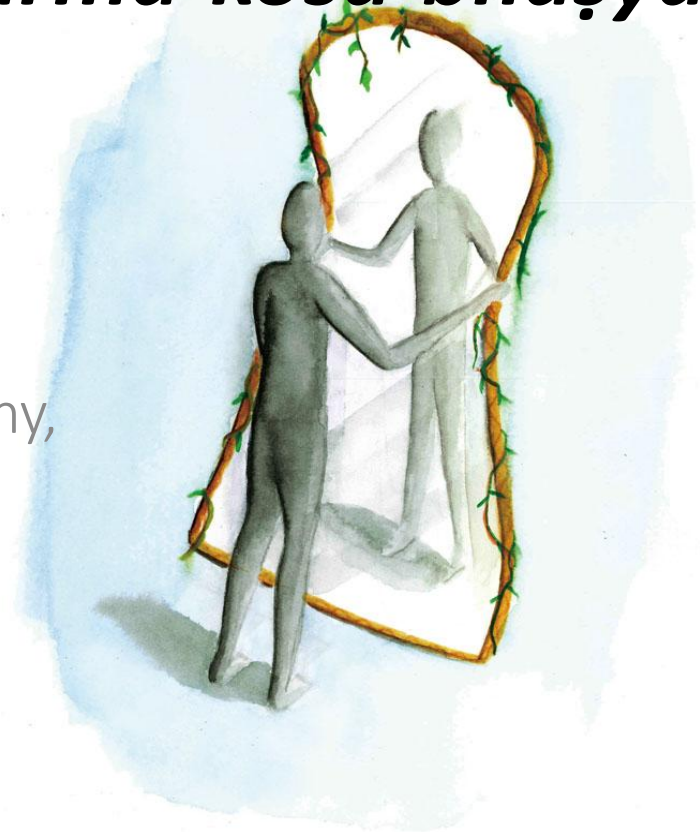
Early Buddhist Scholasticism in India, Central-Asia, and China

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# Perspectives on the Person and the Self in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya*

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# I. Introduction

- 🚶 Among all the Buddha's teachings, those on the nature and identity of the self are considered basic to Buddhist practices. The Buddha's teachings are often summarized in Dharma-Seals (*dharma-mudrā*), the characteristic principles of the factors of the sentient world. One of the three or four Dharma-Seals is formulated as follows: All factors are not-self (*anātmanaḥ sarva-dharmāḥ/ sabbe dhammā anattā*).

# I. Introduction

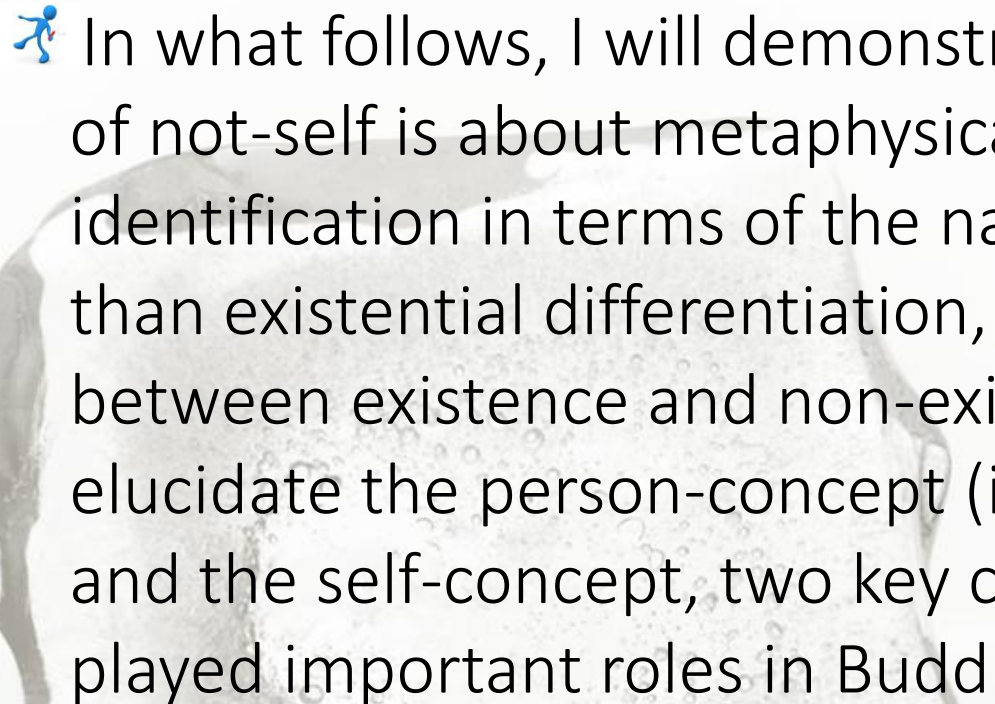
✧ Although the principle of the not-self of factors (*dharmā-nairātmya*) constitutes one of the most distinctive features of the Buddha's teachings, its meaning is not fully conveyed by its summarized proposition, and is therefore open to various interpretations and thoughts. For example, the Indian Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu (c. 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century C.E.), added a ninth chapter, entitled "Refutation of the Doctrine of the Self" (*Ātmavāda-pratiṣedha*) or "An Examination of the Person (or Individual)" (*Pudgala-viniścāya*) to his masterwork of Abhidharma studies: the *Commentary on the Treasury of the Abhidharma* (*Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya*).

# *I. Introduction*

 In the chapter “Refutation of the Doctrine of the Self” (henceforth abbreviated as “Refutation”), Vasubandhu briefly presents his perspectives on the person and the self, raises objections to the viewpoint of the Pudgalavādins (or Vātsīputrīyas i.e., followers of Vātsīputra), replies to the Pudgalavādins’ objections to his own view, and then replies to the objections put forward by the Tīrthikas (Forders) i.e., non-Buddhist thinkers of India, specifically the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika tradition.




# *I. Introduction*


A glass of water with a small blue figure icon on the left side. The glass is filled with water and has a small blue figure icon on the left side. The background is a light, textured surface.

👤 In what follows, I will demonstrate that the doctrine of not-self is about metaphysical identification, i.e., identification in terms of the nature of reality, rather than existential differentiation, i.e., differentiation between existence and non-existence. I go on to elucidate the person-concept (individual-concept) and the self-concept, two key concepts that have played important roles in Buddhist traditions.

# *I. Introduction*

 Further, this paper adjusts perspectives on not-person and not-self in a way that is conducive to gaining insight into the sentient world. Moreover, three critiques of Abhidharmic oriented perspectives are formulated from the understanding of the “not-dharmic” oriented perspectives. In conclusion, I propose a shift from “Abhidharmic” to “not-dharmic” perspectives while engaging in philosophical inquiry into Buddhist teachings.

## *II. Not-self Critically Reconsidered*

 First of all, the issue of not-self is not about whether the self exists or not. Rather, it is about whether a certain factor is to be identified as the self or not. In other words, the issue of not-self is about metaphysical identification rather than existential differentiation.




✧ In many sūtras of the Śrāvaka-yāna, the Buddha frequently asks prospective practitioners to attentively watch such factors as the five aggregates (*pañca skandhāḥ*) in their state of impermanence, suffering, inclination to change, and to critically consider if any such factor is a valid identification of the self (是我), as other than the self (是異我) [in the sense of being owned by the self (是我所)], or as either the very factor being within the self, or the self being within the very factor (是相在 / 色乃至識既是在我中、而我亦是在色乃至識中). Well-taught disciples will unequivocally answer that none of the five aggregates are qualified to be identified as the self (不是我 / 非是我), as other than the self (不異我 / 非異我) [in the sense of being owned by the self] (不是我所 / 非是我所), or as either the very aggregate being within the self or the self being within the very aggregate (不相在 / 非相在 / 色乃至識既非在我中、而我亦非在色乃至識中).

## *II. Not-self Critically Reconsidered*

- 🚶 The procedure of examining the issue of self/not-self can thus be analyzed and differentiated into the following four steps.
- 🚶 First, one is required to observe the five aggregates in the flow of life.
- 🚶 Second, actually observing the five aggregates in the flow of life affords a vantage point from which the issue of the person or the self can be better examined.
- 🚶 Third, after observing the five aggregates in the flow of life, it becomes clear that none of the five aggregates can be identified as the person or the self.

## *II. Not-self Critically Reconsidered*

 Fourth, after proposing the thesis of non-identifiability (or non-identity) of the self, i.e., the thesis of not-self, it is unnecessary, or even erroneous, to claim either that the self exists or that the self does not exist. In other words, after understanding the non-identifiability (or non-identity) of the self, one is freed from any view attached to the self and the differentiation between existence and non-existence.

## *II. Not-self Critically Reconsidered*

- 👤 Concerning the self-concept, or better put, the word “I,” it is basically a multi-dimensional and dynamic construct, active in verbal expression by recourse to the first-person singular pronoun, “the content of which is influenced by the social situation at a given time, in addition to being influenced by an individual’s current goals, emotional and motivational state.”
- 👤 Moreover, concerning the differentiation between existence and non-existence, it is preferable not to regard such differentiation as the nature of reality or hold on to such differentiation.



### *III. The Two Concepts of Person (Individual) and Self Revisited: For Better or Worse*


- ✧ In this paper, the person-concept (individual-concept) is considered as a partial equivalent of the Sanskrit word *pudgala* (or *puggala* in Pāli).
- ✧ First, as an individual, the term “*pudgala* is traditionally said to be derived from *pum̐-* (joining) plus *-gala* (breaking).” Hence, etymologically, the term *pudgala* means the individual or separate individual that undergoes modifications by combination and dissection.



### III. The Two Concepts of Person (Individual) and Self Revisited: For Better or Worse

Second, *pudgala* is rendered as a person. If the focus is on human beings rather than on physical objects or other patterns of sentient beings, then the literal meaning of the term *pudgala* can shift from the individual to the person or a single *human*. In Sanskrit, several other terms such as *puruṣa*, *manuṣya*, *nara*, or *jana* can be used to mean human being in general and person in particular. However, the term *pudgala* is probably more salient in conveying the connotation of a person separate from other persons by providing an idea of being different or separate.

### *III. The Two Concepts of Person (Individual) and Self Revisited: For Better or Worse*

 Third, *pudgala* is rendered as a continuous stream. If the focus is on the process of integration and disintegration rather than on individual or person, then the term *pudgala* is called upon to act as continuous stream, i.e., the bundle of tendencies that keeps reincarnating as an individual or a person in a continuous flow of karma and rebirth.

## *IV. Perspectives Reoriented to Not-person and Not-self*

- 🚶 Before the term *pudgala* can be safely used to support any doctrinal thesis, it is crucial to examine what this term is.
- 🚶 First, no matter how broad the usage of the term *pudgala* may become with its connotations from individual to person to continuous stream, it is essentially a conceptual device to convey certain connotations. In short, the term *pudgala* is a conceptual expression.
- 🚶 Second, one of the most overlooked and often neglected aspects of inquiry is asking what can be identified as *pudgala*.

## *IV. Perspectives Reoriented to Not-person and Not-self*

✧ If the constant flux of the five aggregates is actually observed, there is no single factor identifiable as *pudgala*. Moreover, apart from the five aggregates, none of the perceptible and observable phenomena can be identified as *pudgala* either. Therefore, with or without the five aggregates, nothing can be identified as *pudgala*, i.e., nothing can be identified as individual or person or continuous stream. In light of non-identification, it can be proposed that the reality of individual is not-individual; the reality of person is not-person; and the reality of continuous stream is not-continuous stream. In short, the term *pudgala* is not-*pudgala*.



## *IV. Perspectives Reoriented to Not-person and Not-self*

- As seen from the above analysis, it is certain that as a conceptual expression, the term *pudgala* is in reality not-*pudgala*. This seemingly paradoxical discovery comes mainly from a reorientation of perspectives.
- Just as the term *pudgala* (person) is in reality not-*pudgala* (non-identity of *pudgala*; not-person), so the term self in reality is not-self. This discovery does not proceed from concepts to objects referred to as most people and philosophical traditions would do. Rather, it reorients its perspective, and proceeds from the perceptible and observable phenomena to debunk conceptualization.



## V. Critiques of Abhidharmic Orientation of Perspectives

- 🚶 In the ninth chapter of the *Abhidharmakośa*, namely “Refutation of the Doctrine of the Self” or “An Examination of the Person (or Individual),” Vasubandhu presents his thoughts on the topics of *pudgala* and self. Although Vasubandhu criticizes the Pudgalavādins and the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika tradition, they all share at least a very similar orientation of perspectives, which can be labeled as “abhidharmic.”
- 🚶 The most prominent characteristic of the abhidharmic orientation of perspectives is abhidharma, i.e., dealing with (*abhi-*) conceptual factors (dharmas).

## *V. Critiques of Abhidharmic Orientation of Perspectives*

- 🚶 If a perspective is a way of seeing the world, then abhidharmic orientation of perspectives takes conceptual factors as a starting point and sees the world based on how propositional *thoughts are* constructed from conceptual factors.
- 🚶 Abhidharmic orientation of perspectives on the world is to some extent overshadowed by a reduction to concepts or conceptual *thoughts which distance themselves from the reality of the world and seemingly stand right over there as conceptual entities.*

Such an orientation is very different from what is found in the sūtras of the Śrāvaka-yāna and even in such Mahāyāna scriptures as the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*, where the observation of what is really going on in the sentient world is taken as a starting point, and conceptual factors are mostly regarded as *designations by provisional naming (prajñapti/ paññatti) and can be linguistically negated, or discarded, on account of observational insight into reality and soteriological ascent on Buddhist paths of cultivation*. Since conceptual factors (dharmas) can be *thus negated or discarded by negative markers*, such an orientation of perspectives can be labeled as “not-dharmic.” In a sense, the “abhidharmic” orientation of perspectives is a concept-based approach while the “not-dharmic” orientation of perspectives is a concept-transcending approach.

## V. Critiques of Abhidharmic Orientation of Perspectives

✧ both Vasubandhu and the Pudgalavādins can agree that *pudgala* is not the self. However, the ontological status of *pudgala* can become a major source of disputes. According to Vasubandhu, *pudgala* exists by reason of being the same in existence as collections of the five aggregates. By contrast, the Pudgalavādins are portrayed as denying that *pudgala* is the same in existence as collections of the five aggregates. In particular, the Pudgalavādins insist that *pudgala* exists by reason of being neither the same as nor different from collections of the five aggregates, and therefore its existence is inexplicable (*avaktavya*).



## V. Critiques of Abhidharmic Orientation of Perspectives

- With the above overview in mind, three critiques can be formulated as to the perspectives therein.
- Critique one: Should *pudgala* be regarded as an entity possessing existence as an intrinsic part of its nature?
- Surprisingly, it is in the same vein that both Vasubandhu and the Pudgalavādins insist on the existence of *pudgala*.
- Critique two: Should the assertion of existence/non-existence be applied to a single item? Just like most of those who follow the abhidharmic orientation of perspectives, both Vasubandhu and the Pudgalavādins are inclined to apply the assertion of existence/non-existence to a single item such as *pudgala*.



From the perspective of conditioned co-arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*), an item does not stand alone by itself, but arises from the condition of *a priori* and surrounding context. If the existence/non-existence is asserted, it is better to address the link between a certain item and its context. Obviously both Vasubandhu and the Pudgalavādins fail to take conditioned co-arising into consideration when asserting the existence of *pudgala*, and, consequently, fail to make it clear how *pudgala* can arise and cease. Without understanding the mechanism of arising and cessation, the assertion of the existence of *pudgala* begins with an attachment to a single conceptual item, and may end up with a view of eternalism (*śāśvata-dṛṣṭi*).

## V. Critiques of Abhidharmic Orientation of Perspectives

🚶 Critique three: How should the two concepts of *pudgala* and self be combined to make assertions germane to the sentient world? Although both Vasubandhu and the Pudgalavādins hold the same view that *pudgala* is not the self, what lies beneath the surface of compliance with the thesis of not-self definitely deserves further inspection. It is important to know that both concepts of *pudgala* and self are not at the level that can be perceived or observed. Rather, both concepts are convenient tools for verbal communication and philosophical discourses.

## V. Critiques of Abhidharmic Orientation of Perspectives

🚶 However, if philosophical discourses merely remain at the level of conceptual items with partisan views, such discourses are probably not going anywhere except being entangled in seemingly unsolvable disputes. A feasible and better approach is to start by perceiving or observing such factors as the five aggregates in the flow of life, and gaining insight into the reality of the five aggregates, and explicating the relation between the five aggregates, *pudgala*, and self.

## V. Critiques of Abhidharmic Orientation of Perspectives

✧ In sum, the five aggregates are at the level that can be and should be perceived or observed. Although the five aggregates are impermanent and suffering, and in reality are not qualified to be identified as the self, they are often individually or collectively regarded as the self in linguistic convention and frequently encountered in philosophical views as such. Although the five aggregates can also be alternatively termed as *pudgala* to match such cognitive impressions as individual, person or continuous stream, it is unnecessary, or even incorrect to assert the independent existence of *pudgala* in itself.



## V. Critiques of Abhidharmic Orientation of Perspectives

Therefore, both concepts of *pudgala* and self can be switched to the five aggregates, which can be perceived and understood as empty of such dharmas as the five aggregates. Since the five aggregates are empty of said dharmas as the five aggregates, the so-called five aggregates are in reality not the five aggregates. In light of this insightful understanding of the emptiness of the five aggregates, the relation between the five aggregates, *pudgala*, and self, on the one hand, is equally and coherently empty without any substantialistic or ontological distinction per se -- on the other it is subject to cognitive differentiation and linguistic variation.


## *VI. Conclusion: From “Abhidharmic” to “Not-dharmic” Orientation of Perspectives*

👤 The historical development of Buddhism has witnessed a considerable range of schools, thinkers and texts. In order for a particular view to be advocated, and other views to be opposed, more and more technical terms are brought forward to serve this purpose. Consequently, technical terms as dharmas (conceptual factors) are primarily what are being dealt with especially in scholastic endeavors. Dealing with (*abhi-*) conceptual factors (dharmas) as its first and foremost task begets the name of “abhidharma.”

## VI. Conclusion: From “Abhidharmic” to “Not-dharmic” Orientation of Perspectives

🚶 The abhidharmic orientation of perspectives is inclined to organize, classify, analyze, and compare conceptual factors while paying little attention to the question of firsthand observation in the treatment of the encountered concepts. Not figuring out if the encountered concepts are eligible for firsthand observation, and ignoring the tendency to regard them as entities with preconceived expectations, are major factors that make the abhidharmic orientation of perspectives entangled in such concepts as the five aggregates, *pudgala*, and self.

## *VI. Conclusion: From “Abhidharmic” to “Not-dharmic” Orientation of Perspectives*

 If we do not content ourselves with a mere knowledge of Buddhist history about what has been said by whom and how it has been interpreted, but rather relate the views to both the procedure through which those views are formed and the reality of the sentient world, then, and only then, do we approach the five aggregates not as conceptual factors, but as impermanent phenomena of the sentient world. From the firsthand observation of the impermanence and conditioned co-arising of the five aggregates, comes the insightful understanding of the not-self and emptiness of the five aggregates.



## *VI. Conclusion: From “Abhidharmic” to “Not-dharmic” Orientation of Perspectives*

🧑 It is conventional knowledge to speak of the five aggregates, *pudgala*, and self, but it is wise to state that the so-called five aggregates are in reality not the five aggregates, and that the five aggregates, *pudgala*, and self are designations of provisional naming without any substantialistic or ontological distinction per se. This transition from an “abhidharmic” to a “not-dharmic” orientation of perspectives is a fundamental stance worth appreciating and appropriating within Buddhist philosophy.

*Thank you!*

