

## An Analysis on the Controversy of Person's Existence Made by the *Pudgalavādins* (Person School)

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Prima facie, the postulation of the 'Pudgala' (person) by the Interdenominational School of Buddhism appeared as a contrivance made to advance the personal responsibility, the personal identity, the personal initiative and the moral commitment etc. of Buddhism. Supporting to this presumption Priestley hypothesizes the purpose of the Pudgalavāda. It is thus, "Without a real self, they believed, the operation of Karma would be inexplicable, and the cultivation of benevolence towards other selves and Buddha's compassion in teaching them would be deluded if not actually meaningless."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, *Pudgalavādins* postulated 'the person concept' to be made more meaningful and intelligible psycho-ethical doctrine in Buddhism. Even though their attempt was considerably important in the above circumstance, for *Theravadins*, *Pudgalavāda* was not more than the *Ātmavāda*.

*Pudgalavādins* have no their own canonical literature. Therefore, doctrinal factors and information related to the *Pudgalavāda* should be recognized through the literature of opponents who negated and denied 'the person thesis' of *Pudgalavāda*. *Kathāvatthupparakāraṇa*, *Abhidharmakōṣa*, *Smaabhēdōparavāna Sūtra*, *Aṣṭādasa Nikāya Sāstra*, *Dīpaśāstra*, and *Mahāvamsa* etc. are some volumes that give accounts on *Pudgalavāda*. Roger William<sup>2</sup> seems to doubt the reliability of these texts as he thinks those texts do not demonstrate more than bare existence and information of *Pudgalavāda*, Howev-

er, *Kathāvatthupparakāraṇa* which was composed to repudiate heterodox views gives ample evidences about the doctrines of *Pudgalavāda*.

*Pudgalavādins* asserted that the postulation of *Pudgala* (person) is an essential fact. The *Pudgala* they asserted is *neither* identical nor distinct from the five aggregates (*Khandha*), further, they emphasized that their supposition of *Pudgala* is not a spiritual substance, and it is incompatible with the *Ātma* of Brahmanism. To substantiate their proposition they affirmed that the Buddha has very often used the term *Pudgala* to explain some doctrinal facts, such as the Buddha said that there is a person who entered upon the path of personal welfare (*atthi puggalo attahitāya paṭipanno*)<sup>3</sup> and there is one person in the world coming into existence who arises for the well-being and happiness of mankind as whole, sympathy with the world of men for the welfare and benefit of men and gods (*ekapuggalo bhikkhave loke uppajjamāno uppajjati bahujana hitāya bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ*).<sup>4</sup> These assertions of the Buddha were employed by the *Pudgalavādins* to bear out their assumption of the person's existence. Another well recognized Sutta they employed was *Bharahāra sutta* of *Khandha Saṃyutta*. Here Buddha mentions, "Bhikkhus I will teach you the burden, the carrier of the burden.... And what Bhikkhus the burden (*katamo ca bhikkhavē bhāro?*), it should be said, the five aggregates subject to clinging, what five, the form, the feeling, the perception, the volitional formation and the consciousness subject to cling. This is called burden (*ayaṃ uccati bhikkhave bhāro*) and what bhikkhus is the carrier of the burden (*katamoca bhikkhave bharahāro?*). It should be said, the person this venerable one of such a name and clan. This is called the carrier of the burden (*ayaṃ uccati bhikkhave bharahāro*).<sup>5</sup> In this particular Sutta the Buddha mentions the burden (*bhāro*) and a carrier of the burden (*bārahāro*).

In this context, the carrier of the burden considered as existence person by *Pudgalavādins*. *Na Tumahāka Sutta*, Buddha advised monk to abandon the sense organs, the abandonment of the sense organs cause to well-being and happiness for long time.<sup>6</sup> For *Pudgalavādins*, the above assertions of the Buddha indirectly implicate there is person besides the sense organs. In addition to the above quotations it believes to be that the *Pudgalavādins* employed the conventional wage of the person depicted in *Puggalapaññattipakarāṇa* to postulate their proposition on the person.

However, the above usages of the term '*Puggala* (person)' in the early Buddhism do not mean 'a spiritual entity' but it is the term used to indicate the conventional person. Therefore, the postulation of the person's existence depending on the above facts was very controversial. The controversy arise due to their 'middle standing' on the ground of the person existence. For them *Pudgala* is neither a conventional (*sammuti*) presumption nor a spiritual entity. Without siding with a conventional material implication as well as excluding the metaphysical spiritual implication they tried to stand on the middle. Therefore, it is not very much clear about the proposition of the person's existence of *Pudgalavādins*. In this context, Theravadins used a dialectical methodology to adjudicate the controversy on the person's existence in *Kathāvatthupparakāraṇa*. In *Kathāvatthupparakāraṇa*, *Theravadins* ask, "Whether the person they postulated is identical or is not identical with the five aggregates," "What is the relationship between the *Pudgalavāda* and five aggregates" Does person exist truly (*saccikatthā*) and absolutely (*paramatthā*)," "Whether the *Pudgala* is same as aggregates (*skhandha*), faculties (*āyatana*), elements (*dhātu*) and sense organs (*indriya*) or is exterior."

*Pudgalavādins'* answer was that there is (*āmanta*) a person truly (*saccikatthā*) but they emphasized that this person

is neither identical with *Skhandā* and other elements nor distinct from them. However, opposed to this proposition, the antagonists of the *Pudgalavādins* emphasized that *Pudgalavāda* is confused and an unintelligible concept. Therefore, to demonstrate this indescribable relationship between the *Pudgalavāda* and the five aggregates, *Pudgalavādins* used the parable of fire and fuel. Fire neither identical with fuel nor distinct from it as well as fire is not a mere reference, by touching fire it is possible to experience it. The same way the relationship between the *Pudgala* and the five aggregates is indescribable. These answers of the *Pudgalavādins* imply that the *Pudgala* they emphasized cannot be materialized.

However, their statements that the *Pudgala* is neither identical with five aggregates nor distinct from them gives bare light to get understanding of what form of existence of the person they have postulated. Therefore, considering the above dilemma, Roger William<sup>7</sup> mentions, "It has to be claimed that the postulation adds something, that the *Pudgala* is not identical with the *Skhandha*. If that were all it was, the postulate would have no point. It has to be claimed also that it is not distinct, that is not a spiritual substance in temporary association with the *Skhandha*. Such a view would amount to the reassertion of the *Ātma*." *Pudgalavādins* were very careful and attentive when they explained the *Pudgala* notion. If they declared the person is identical with the five aggregates it would not be a new idea of person, other than what *Theravadins* have declared about conventional person. Such idea (*Theravadins* mentioned that the combination of the five aggregates conventionally called as person and there is no real existence of person) did not conduce to achieve the objective of the *Pudgalavādins* because that idea already has negated the personal identity. As it is mentioned earlier, objective of *Pudgalavādins* was to make the intelligible and meaningful of the whole Buddhist teaching while

postulating personal identity which is different from the usual 'person concept' of *Theravadins* but through the above idea of *Pudgalavādins* they could not postulate a meaningful answer about the existence of person, therefore, their attempt seems to be in vain. That would be the reason why they did not directly postulate the five aggregates same as person.

At the same time, if they asserted that *Pudgala* is distinct from the five aggregates or *Pudgala* is spiritual substance that temporary associate with five aggregates, it would be directly siding with the *Ātma* notion. Avoiding the above both notions *Pudgalavādins* wanted to establish the thesis of personal identity. This would be the reason why *Pudgalavādins* declared that *Pudgala* is neither identical with the five aggregates nor distinct from it.

If *Pudgala* is neither identical with the five aggregates nor distinct from it or *Pudgala* is not a separated spiritual substance, then, who is the *Pudgala* they have postulated? The answer was given by the *Pudgalavādins* is, it is indescribable. Sometimes, they might think that further clarification of their notion would be confused by others.

The above concept of *Pudgalavādins* on the person's existence vehemently criticized and negated by the *Sthaviravādins*. *Pudgalavādins* became notorious among the *Sthaviravādins* as monks who try to embed the *Ātma* notion into Buddhism, and also *Pudgalavādins* recognized as 'inside persons who hold misconception (*antaścaraṭīrthaka*).'<sup>8</sup> Therefore, there is no clear answer given by *Pudgalavādins* on the above context.

However, it is possible to assume that though the notion of *Pudgala* is not identical with five aggregates nor separated

substance it exists just like Upanishad *Ātma*. The postulation of *Pudgala* might be succession of life to another or rebirth process conditioned by *Karma*. Roger William mentions, “The argument may be extended to involve rebirth—that is, succession from one life to another, as conditioned by Karman... if my interest is to be engaged in the possibility of succession through lives, this succession need to be in some way or other, personal. The postulation of a *Pudgala* may be one such way.”<sup>8</sup> According to this view of Roger succession through lives of individual have postulated as person’s existence by *Pudgalavādins*.

### Conclusion

*Pudgalavādins* strongly emphasize that their notion of *Pudgala* is not identical with spiritual substances like *Ātma*, then, why did *Sthaviravādins* vehemently criticize and repudiate *Pudgalavāda*? The reason is that *Sthaviravādins* keenly recognized that accepting even such lesser concept which is a little bit close to the *Upanishad Ātma* concept would be reasoned to confuse and contradict the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. However, through the above facts it is possible to assume that the objective of the *Pudgalavāda* was not to embed *Ātma* concept into Buddhism. Their sole purpose was to make the intelligible and the meaningful of psycho-ethical combination of the Buddhist doctrine while postulating personal identity.

### End Notes

1. Priestley, L.C.D. (1999). *Pudgalavāda Buddhism, The reality of the individual terminate self*, University of Toronto, Centre for South Asian Studies.p.217.
2. William Farrington. R. (2007). *The Identity Problem in Buddhist Ethics: An examination of Buddhist and Partition Conception of the Subject*, Birkbeck collage, University of Landon, pp.6,7,8 .

3. Kathāvatthupparakaṇa I, Buddha Jayanthi Tripiṭaka p. 36.
4. Ibid p. 178.
5. Bodhi, Bhikkhu. (2000). (Tr.). *Saṃyuttanikāya, III, The book of the Aggregates, Teaching of the Buddha, Connected discourses of the Buddha, A new translation of Saṃyuttanikāya, Wisdom publication, Boston. pp. 871-878.*
6. *Saṃyuttanikāya IV. 81. 82 (PTS).*
7. William Farrington. R. (2007). *The Identity Problem in Buddhist Ethics: An examination of Buddhist and Partition Conception of the Subject*, Birkbeck collage, University of Landon, pp.90,91.
8. Ibid.