Chapter 24

Pudgalavāda Doctrines of the Person

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No Buddhist school has been more vilified by its Buddhist peers or misunderstood by modern scholars than the so-called pudgalavāda\textsuperscript{1} school. Other Buddhists accused them of violating the fundamental Buddhist tenet of no-self (anātman) by holding the view that a real ontological self exists that, their accusers argued, pudgalavādins try to camouflage by calling it pudgala (person) rather than vātman (self). Modern scholars, forming opinions largely based on or influenced by the hostile polemical literature of the pudgalavādins’ opponents, reiterate that accusation.\textsuperscript{2} In addition, until recently scholars considered pudgalavādins to be a marginal sect, of minor historical and doctrinal influence, significant only for playing the role of reviled heretics. Even the term pudgalavāda, which scholars continue to use, appears to be a disparaging label foisted on them by their opponents, not a term they used to characterize themselves. However, both accusations—of promoting the idea of an ontological self and of being marginal—are directly contradicted by the surviving examples of the pudgalavādins’ own literature and by a more judicious examination of the historical record.

1. I wish to gratefully acknowledge the many helpful suggestions from Lance Cousins and Stephen Hodge on earlier drafts of the translations.

1. I leave pudgalavāda in lower case, rather than capitalize it, in order to indicate that it is not the proper name of a school or sect, but a label attached to the Vātsīputrīya, Saṃmūlīya, etc. schools by their opponents.

2. See, for example, Priestley 1999 and Duerlinger 2003.
Starting with the charge of marginality, it turns out that the Vātsiputṛiyas (their actual name, taken from their founder) were one of the most popular mainstream Buddhist sects in India for more than a thousand years. Some traditional sources claim their origins go back to the time of the Buddha, though most scholars think that other sources assigning their beginning to the third century B.C.E. are more accurate. By the second century C.E., at the latest, they had subdivided into four distinct subschools, the most prominent and successful being the Śammitiyas (see Vasumitra’s Tenets, translated here). Two Chinese pilgrims who traveled to India in the seventh century, Xuanzang and Yijing, inform us in their travelogues that the Śammitiyas were to be found throughout India and even in Southeast Asia and the South Sea Islands. They were especially prominent in Western India, a region that also served as a travel route through which Buddhism flowed to the north out of India and into which Central and East Asian Buddhists came to study in Buddhism’s homeland.³

While their opponents—notably Vasubandhu’s Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya (chap. 9, Duerlinger 2003), Candrakīrti’s Madhyamakāvatara (chap. 6), and Śantarāṣṭita and Kamalaśīla’s Tatvamārga-pañjikā—accused them of promoting the idea of a “real” self, the handful of surviving Vātsiputiya texts strenuously deny this, instead insisting that the pudgala is a prajñapti (only a nominal existent) that is neither identical to nor different from the skandhas. Since accusing a Buddhist opponent of harboring an ātmavāda view (view of eternal selfhood) is one of the most virulent accusations a Buddhist can lodge against another, and we find this trump card played in several other questionable situations—such as against the Yogācāras’ theory of an eighth consciousness, the ālaya-vijñāna, when clearly the Yogācāras have taken great pains to define the ālaya-vijñāna in ways that fully avoid that charge—we should be cautious about accepting such accusations on their face.

Prajñapti is a multivalent term that many Buddhist schools deployed in a variety of ways. Literally prajñapti means “leading to knowledge.” It can mean a teaching device, a designation, an instruction, a heuristic, a name or label for a complex of conditions, and so on.⁴ For example, Buddhists

³. Xuanzang’s travelogue carefully records the monasteries and temples in the various regions and cities he visited, their sectarian affiliations, and the number of monastics in each. Lamotte’s tabulation of Xuanzang’s census (Lamotte 1988: 539–544) indicated that half of the non-Mahāyāna monastics in India were Śammitiya, with double the number of monks of the next largest sect, the Sthaviras (Theravādins), and with almost three times as many monasteries as all the other sects combined (1,351 of 2,079 total monasteries). Cousins has argued that Lamotte miscalculated, overestimating the Śammitiya presence, but even his downward recalculation preserves their status as the largest non-Mahāyāna group, though he reduces their percentage to only a fourth of such monastics (Cousins 1995). At Buddhism’s demise in India, the Śammitiyas were the last Indian Buddhists in the Northwest to be absorbed into Islam after the Arab conquests (Maclean 1989).

argued about whether things such as “karmic accrual” (prāpti) or “aging” are actual real things (dravya) or only nominalist labels (prajñapti) for complexes of causal processes. The causal processes would be real (dravya), the labels only conceptual shorthand (prajñapti). That the earliest Buddhist texts associated pudgala with prajñapti is clear not only from the proof-texts cited in Vātsīputriya texts (which correspond to passages still found in the Theravāda Tipiṭaka), but from the title of the fourth text in the Pali Abhidhamma canon, Puggala-paññati (Skt. Pudgala-prajñapti), heuristically translated into English as Human Types (Law 1979).

The Vātsīputriya argument is that the pudgala is a necessary prajñapti since any theory of karma, or any theory that posits that individuals can make spiritual progress for themselves or can assist other individuals to do likewise, is incoherent without it. Karma means that an action done at one time has subsequent consequences for the same individual at a later time, or even a later life. If the positive and negative consequences of an action don’t accrue to the self-same individual, then it would make no sense to speak of things like progress (who is progressing?), and Buddhist practice itself becomes incoherent. If there are no persons, then there is no one who suffers, no one who performs and reaps the consequences of his or her own karma, no Buddha, no Buddhists, and no Buddhism. Obviously, those are not acceptable consequences for a Buddhist.

Buddhists speak of skandha-upādāna, “the aggregates of appropriation,” which raises the obvious question: Who/what appropriates the five skandhas, collecting them into a single living entity? If the appropriator is something different from the skandhas themselves, then there is a sixth skandha, which is doctrinally impermissible. If the skandhas appropriate themselves, that leads to a vicious cycle of infinite regress. Hence, the Vātsīputriyas argue, the nominal person (pudgala) is neither the same as nor different from the skandhas. It is a heuristic fiction that avoids these unwarranted consequences and lends coherence by also corresponding to how actual persons experience themselves—that is, as distinct individuals continuous with, but not absolutely identical to or reducible to, their own pasts and futures. Similarly, Buddhists speak of past and future lives. But what remains constant or continuous between such lives? If it is a self-same invariant identity, then this would indeed be a case of ātmavāda, a view the Vātsīputriyas, like all Buddhists, reject. In what sense would someone be the same or different from the person in one’s previous life? If completely different, then to posit a continuity between them is incoherent. If the same, then their real discontinuities are ignored, leading to a form of eternalism, another impermissible view for Buddhists. Hence, they are neither the same nor different, but linked by a fictional pudgala. Finally, Buddhist practice leads to nirvana; but who attains this? If there is an integral individual that ceases on attaining nirvana, then this would entail the unwarranted view of annihilationalism. If there is no cessation of the karmic individual, then there is no nirvana. Both extremes, though implicit in standard Buddhist formulations, render Buddhism itself
incoherent, a problem only solved, the Vātsīputrīyas argue, if one admits the fictional *pudgala* implicit in standard Buddhist doctrine. A “fiction,” in this sense, does not simply mean something unreal, but rather, like any good work of fiction, something that does *explain*, in a non-literal way, something real, and that can move, inspire, elicit, and evoke meaningful thoughts and actions. The *pudgala* is that type of “fiction.” The self as permanent selfhood is unreal, but the experience of individual personhood is a fiction everyone experiences.\(^5\) While for the pudgalavādins there is no ontological “self” or permanent, substantial person, there is a fictitious “person” that is neither the same as nor different from the actual ontological processes accepted by all other Buddhists as “real” constituents of a being, namely, the *skandhas*, *āyatanas*, and so on. The three *prajñāaptis* discussed in the passages are unavoidable fictions that not only provide doctrinal coherence; they also serve as refutations and correctives for insidious false views, such as eternalism and annihilationism.

Though only a tiny portion of the pudgalavādins’ vast literature has survived, we are fortunate to have two Chinese translations of what, at its core, was a single text. These are *Si ahanmu chao jie* (Commentary on the Four Agamas), authored by *Vasubhadra,* and translated by Kumārabuddhi in 382, and *Sanfa du lun* (Treatise on Liberation by the Threefold Teachings), also attributed to *Vasubhadra,* translated by Gautama Sanghadeva in 391.\(^7\) For convenience, I will refer to these as the Longer Version and Shorter Version,

\(^5\) Later Buddhists, especially in Mahāyāna, used the term *upāya* (expedient means) to signify a similar notion of efficacious fiction. That notion of *upāya* may have directly developed from the Vātsīputrīya understanding of *prajñāapti.*

\(^6\) An asterisk before a Sanskrit reconstruction from Chinese indicates that it is unattested or involves some uncertainty.

\(^7\) The translator of the Longer Version, Kumārabuddhi, was a member of the Turfan royal family who, after becoming a monk, was sent to China as PART OF a diplomatic envoy to deliver Buddhist texts and other gifts to the Chinese rulers. Dao’an, a leading Chinese figure at that time, drafted him to translate the Longer Version, believing it was an *Aśhīdrāma* text, the one “basket” of the Triple Basket (*Tripitaka*) that had not been translated into Chinese yet (the other two baskets are the *Vinaya* and the *āgamas*). Huiyuan, Dao’an’s major disciple, supervised the translation, which involved Kumārabuddhi reading the text aloud and explaining it, and Chinese assistants copying down what he said while attempting to render it in literate prose. Huiyuan describes the translation process as difficult, suggesting that Kumārabuddhi was difficult to work with and that he, Huiyuan, was not fully satisfied with the results. The resulting text remains difficult to understand in many places. This is probably why, ten years later, after Dao’an had died, Huiyuan pressed another translator, Gautama Sanghadeva, to retranslate the treatise. Sanghadeva’s work was more professional, but he was working at a time before translation standards were adequately established (Dao’an, famously, was a leading force pressing for such standards), so his efforts are also often unclear to modern readers. His command of Chinese (as well as Indic languages) appears to be noticeably superior to Kumārabuddhi’s. While Kumārabuddhi’s sectarian affiliation is unclear, Sanghadeva was probably a Vātsīputrīya, since Huiyuan informs us that he devoutly recited the *Sanfa du lun* daily. Incidentally, an idiosyncratic feature of Huiyuan’s own doctrines is the idea of an immortal *shen,* or spirit, which likely owes something to his *pudgalavādin* contacts.
respectively. Both Chinese renderings—as is unfortunately the case for many pre-fifth-century Chinese Buddhist translations—are difficult texts, with many problematic passages. These two versions also greatly differ from each other in wording, phrasing, semantic implications, the ordering of parts, and so on, with one or the other expanding at certain points through extended passages entirely absent from the other version. This will be obvious when comparing the two sections translated here, which are based on a single core passage.

Both versions describe three types of prajñapti. The Shorter Version appears first here, even though it was translated later, because it offers a more concise version of the passage. The Longer Version expands on several things, most notably the second type of prajñapti, which the Shorter Version describes only as “prajñapti of the past,” while the Longer Version renames this “prajñapti of metaphorical devices” and applies it to the “three times,” that is, past, present and future. Whether the differences represent different redactions of a root text, sectarian distinctions among the Vātsiputriyas, or liberties taken by the translators is unclear. The key to understanding both versions is to see that all three prajñaptis have no other purpose than to avoid the hidden, “unsaid” presuppositions lurking in the doctrines held by other Buddhists; that while other Buddhists might leave the word “pudgala” unsaid, the narratives presupposed in their doctrines require it.

The issue the passage raises is not the affirmation of something that exists ineffably—as some modern scholars have assumed—but rather that Buddhists who talk about such things as skandhas-of-appropriation (skandha-upādāna), previous (and future) lives, and nirvana as entailing the cessation of the appropriation of skandhas—as all mainstream Buddhists do—are dabbling in “unsayables,” but they are not aware of that, and consider such discussion taboo. One of the two likely Sanskrit candidates for the term being translated into Chinese as “not-said” or “unsayable” is avācya, which means something “not to be addressed,” “improper to be uttered,” or “not distinctly expressed.” The other candidate is avaktavya, which also means something that should not to be said, but may also indicate something indescribable. The Vātsiputriyas are using it in that double sense: the pudgala is a taboo subject for other Buddhists, even though the metaphysical narratives they employ presuppose it; and what is indicated by the prajñapti “pudgala” cannot be explained more precisely, since appropriation without an appropriator,

8. The translations here are my own, from T. 25.1505.10a3–29 (Longer Version) and T. 25.1506.24a29–b7 (Shorter Version). (T refers to Taishō shinshū daizōkyō. [A standard collection of the East Asian Buddhist canon compiled in Japan] Takakusu Junjiro, Watanabe Kaikyoku, et al. (eds.), 100 vols. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1932.) Priestley also translated both passages (Priestley 1999: 56–60), though in a quite different manner. Summaries of the full texts with partial translations and paraphrases can also be found in Thich Thien Chau 1999. Hurvitz 1967 is a partial translation of the Kumārabuddha text—about one-fifth of the full text—but he does not include the passage translated here. Hurvitz, while recognizing an allusion to a pudgalavāda doctrine in one passage, failed to identify the text as a whole as a pudgalavāda work.
linkage across lives without an invariant identity, and the cessation of a nonself are intrinsically incoherent notions. The Vātsiputriyas are offering a clever polemic that accuses other Buddhists of ignoring the “unsayables” in their own heuristic expressions. The “unsayable” of primary interest to the Vātsiputriyas is the *pudgala* (person), which is a necessary nominal construction required to perform Buddhist analysis, progress on the Buddhist path, and make sense of the most basic Buddhist concepts, especially karma.

The *pudgala* is on the one hand merely a linguistic construction. On the other hand, it involves something in everyone’s experience about which we can say nothing definitively coherent. It is unreal (merely nominal), but experientially, even soterically, effective. As the passage makes clear, the Vātsiputriyas are attempting to forge a middle way between extremes of eternalism and annihilationalism, existence and nonexistence, while affirming that, nevertheless, the *pudgala* as a *prajñapti* is an effective, if imprecise, way of talking about requisites for cultivating the Buddhist path.

The third selection here is the section on the Vātsiputriyas from Vasumitra’s *Tenets of the Different Schools* based on Xuanzang’s Chinese translation. The Indic original is not extant but is available in one Tibetan and three Chinese translations. This text was probably composed around the second century C.E. Vasumitra gives lists of main tenets for eighteen Buddhist schools—several varieties of Mahāsāṅghikas, Sarvāstivāda, Prajñaptivāda, Haimavatas, Mahāsākakas, and so on—presenting them in roughly chronological order with explanations of which schools splintered from which.

Translation: The Shorter Version—From the *Sanfa du lun* (Treatise on Liberation by the Threefold Teachings)

Q: What is unsayable?

A: *The unsayable is [what remains implicit in] the Figurative Expressions (prajñaptis) concerning appropriation, the past, and cessation*.


10. Xuanzang’s translation corresponds well with the Chinese translation attributed to Kumārajiva (T. 49.2032) and the Tibetan version (translated by Dharmākara and Bzang skyong: P. 5639; D. 4138), but Paramārtha’s version (T. 49.2033) contains much additional material, particularly in the Vātsiputriya chapter, probably glosses he added himself since he was from Ujjain, one of the Sammitiya strongholds in India. An odd feature of Paramārtha’s version of Yogācāra is the addition of a ninth consciousness, the Pure Consciousness (*āmala-vijñāna*), over and above the standard Yogācāra eighth consciousness; Sammitiya doctrines may have influenced him in this regard. P. and D. refer to the Peking and Derge editions, respectively, of the Tibetan canon (P.: D.).

11. The italicized passages are the underlying *sūtra*, or basic text. These are then unpacked by further exposition. The Shorter and Longer Versions differ most in the expositions each provides for these basic passages.
[These are] the figurative expressions (prajñapti) concerning appropriation, the figurative expressions concerning the past, and figurative expressions concerning cessation. If someone doesn’t know [what “appropriation,” “past (lives),” and “(nirvanic) cessation” entail,] then they don’t know the unsayable.\(^{12}\)

Figurative expression concerning appropriation is the analysis of whether sentient beings are the same or different from the skandhas, dhātus, and āyatanas they have already appropriated.\(^{13}\)

As to figurative expressions concerning the past, saying “[this person is now so-and-so] because of past skandhas, dhātus, and āyatanas” is just like saying “At that time [in a previous life,] I was named Kuśendra.”\(^{14}\)

As to figurative expressions concerning cessation, saying “it is because appropriation has already ceased” is just like saying “The Bhagavat’s Parinirvāṇa.”

Moreover, [the purpose of these figurative expressions is to dispel false views]. The figurative expressions concerning the past dispel [the idea] that sentient beings are annihilated. Figurative expressions concerning cessation dispel [the idea] that they exist permanently. Figurative expressions concerning the appropriation [of skandhas, etc.] dispel [the idea that sentient beings are] nonexistent. Figurative expressions concerning nonappropriation dispel [the idea that sentient beings qua an eternal self] exist.

Translation: The Longer Version—From the Śi Ahanmu chao jie (Commentary on the Four Āgamas)

Q: What is not said (*avaktavya* or *avacya*)?

A: The not-said: [This refers to what is] not said [or left implicit by other Buddhists] in the heuristics (prajñapti) for appropriation, metaphorical devices, and cessation.

12. What is “implicit” in these figurative expressions (prajñaptis) is the pudgala, the “person,” which is the prajñapti that goes “unsaid” when other Buddhists discuss such basic doctrines.

13. Standard Buddhist “analysis” breaks a person down into skandhas (the five aggregates), the eighteen dhātus (six sense organs, six types of corresponding sensory realms, and the six consciousnesses that arise from contact between organ and object-realm), and twelve āyatanas (six sense organs and six corresponding object-realms). The pudgalavāda position is that the pudgala is neither the same nor different from the skandhas, etc. The passage here suggests the pudgala by referring to a “sentient being.”

14. Using the Buddhist technical jargon of “past skandhas, etc.” to account for a present being is no less figurative than using the “ordinary language” personalist term “I” and a name, since one sense of the term prajñapti is “only a nominal existent.” Both the technical and ordinary ways of expressing the relation between present beings and their previous existences (earlier in this life or in past lives) presuppose the prajñapti “person” (or “being”).
Those are the heuristics for appropriation, heuristics by metaphorical
device, and the heuristics for cessation. This means that whoever is stupid
concerning these “not saids” lacks insight (*ajñana).

The heuristic for appropriation [involves] using the term “a living-one”
(jīva). [The idea] that the presently appropriated skandhas, dhātus, and
āyatanas are appropriated by an inner living-one is a heuristic. This means
that [when one talks about the] present appropriation by an inner living-one
who appropriates dharmas due to karmic conditioning (samskāras) and
the fetters (samyojana), these are heuristics for [discussing] appropriation.

The dharmas that the living-one heuristically appropriates are not the same
as the living-one. It’s not as if one seeks to get the jīva and the body to combine
[into a single thing. To do so would entail opposing extremist absurdities]. If
they are the same, then [the jīva would be] impermanent and [prone to] suffer-
ing; if they are different, then a permanent [jīva] would be prone to suffering.

If it is permanent, one wouldn’t [need to] practice brahmacarya [a religious
life]. If it is not permanent, one would be unsuited for the brahmacarya fruit.
For that which is impermanent, receiving and giving [i.e., meritorious activi-
ties] would be meaningless [since an impermanent being would perish before
such activities could mature into fruition]. Meaninglessness is tantamount to
nihilism; in these two metaphorical devices [of permanence and annihilation]
there is no dharma [conducive to either] suffering or the favorable.

The heuristic by metaphorical device is naming.

[To speak of a person as being the same person in the] “past, future, and
present” is to practice the heuristics by metaphorical device. This is the heu-
ristic metaphorical device of naming [i.e., giving a single name to conditions

15. This text uses fangbian for the second prajñapti (the Short Version called
the second prajñapti “figurative expressions concerning the past”). Fangbian would
become the standard Chinese equivalent for upāya (expedient means). Here, reflecting
an early Chinese usage in which fangbian means to diplomatically express something
without explicitly saying what one means directly or bluntly, it would appear to mean
“metaphorical device,” i.e., a linguistic device that indirectly expresses something
that proves beneficial. The Longer Version will give a greatly expanded explanation of
the second prajñapti that is not restricted only to the past, but that covers the “three
times,” i.e., past, present and future.

16. Dao’an adds a note; “In Sanskrit, the words for ‘living one’ and ‘sentient being’
sound the same.” Whether Dao’an is thinking of sattva or jīva, or both, is unclear,
though what follows works better with jīva. Jīva can mean the inner essence of an
individual, a life-force, or even a soul.

17. Dharmas here means constitutive factors of experience and includes the
skandhas, āyatanas, and dhātus.

18. The fruit of practicing a brahmacarya life would be liberation from which
one doesn’t backslide, hence a stable and permanent condition for the one who has
attained it. On the other hand, if the jīva is actually permanent, invariant, unchang-
ing, eternal, then it could undergo no changes or progress toward liberation, hence
rendering the religious pursuit (brahmacarya) impossible. The jīva would remain
unaffected by all actions and changes in conditions; nothing could affect, improve,
or influence it.
that vary over time] which [linguistically posits] a relationship across the three times (past, present, and future). For example: “In the past, I was King ‘Kuśa’ or “In the future you will have the name Ajita,” [or] “At present I am a prominent merchant,” and [other] such activities as were assumed [in the past] or have not yet been assumed [in the future]. Such conventional roles are numerous, hence they are heuristically adopted [by assuming the person undergoes] annihilation and permanence. [The extremist assumptions embedded in this are exposed by such questions as] If Kuśa has ceased, in what sense am I he? If he has not ceased, in what sense can one say he is I? It is by means of conventionalisms (vyavahāra) that one says so; it is a heuristic metaphorical device.

Q: What are the heuristics for cessation?

A: The heuristics for cessation [are statements such as] “appropriation is exhausted,” or “no [further] appropriation [will occur],” or “coming to rest.” Appropriation is as explained above. Once that has been exhausted, [one says] “no [more] appropriation,” “no obtaining another [life],” “coming to rest,” “[nirvana] with no remainder,” “passing from this shore to the other shore”—these are heuristics for cessation.

The way a [being is usually thought of by other Buddhists,] as cycling through samsara, [implicitly presupposes the extremist views of] annihilation and permanence. If one seeks to stop such [samsaric] activities, one turns to the heuristics of appropriation and the heuristics of parinirvāṇa. This (i.e., parinirvāṇa), too, is a not-said.

If [the pudgala] is [intrinsically] different [from parinirvāṇa], then one doesn’t [obtain] parinirvāṇa. If [the pudgala] is not [inherently] different from [parinirvāṇa], then one doesn’t [obtain] parinirvāṇa.19

These kinds of views have given rise to suffering and have not been explained (“said”) [adequately by other Buddhists].20 [Such Buddhists] would [say] “Parinirvāṇa is like the ceasing of an internal lamp.” The same [applies to] appropriation. If one seeks [to understand] suffering and yet doesn’t clarify it with the heuristics of appropriation and metaphorical devices, [such as] past skandhas, dhātuṣ, and āyatanas, basically this is like saying “I am named King Kuśa.” In such a way the heuristic of future cessation means that the cessation of appropriation is the main point to be explained.

19. The text is terse, open to various readings. One alternate reading would be: “If [appropriation] is different [from parinirvāṇa, since nirvana is defined as the absence of appropriation], then one doesn’t [obtain, i.e., appropriate] parinirvāṇa. If [appropriation] is not different from [parinirvāṇa], then one doesn’t [obtain] parinirvāṇa [since it would be unattainable].” Both readings make a similar point, which is that the extremes of annihilationism and eternalism lurk in such formulations, rendering them illogical.

20. Alternate translations: In such ways has [not understanding] the not-said already given rise to suffering. Or: In such ways [Buddhists] have already [used] the not-said in the views about suffering they have already given rise to.
Translation: The Section on the Vātsiputriyas from Vasumitra’s Tenets of the Different Schools, Based on Xuanzang’s Chinese Translation

These are tenets that the Vātsiputriya schools hold in common:

The pudgala is neither the same [as] nor different from the skandhas. It is a prajñāpāramitā dependent on the skandhas, āyatanas, and dhātus. Saṃskāras (conditioned dharmas) have a temporary duration, while some cease in an instant (kṣaṇika).

Dharmas, if apart from the pudgala, cannot move on from a previous lifetime to a subsequent lifetime. On the basis of the pudgala, one can say there is transference (samkṛanti).

Moreover, even non-Buddhists can attain the five rddhis (superpowers).21

The five consciousnesses have no klesas, and are not apart from klesas.22

If the bonds (samyojana) of the Desire Realm (kāma-dhātu) are eliminated during the Cultivation Stage (bhāvanā-mārga), one is called “free from desire.” But not if eliminated during the Seeing Stage (darsana-mārga).23

It is by [the four wholesome roots, namely,] ksānti (forbearance), nāma (name), nimitta (image), and laukikā agra-dharmā (the highest meditative insight) that one can enter into the correct nature in which no mental defilements (klesas) arise (niyāmāvakrānti or samyaktva-niya).24

If entering niyāmāvakrānti during the twelve mental moments, this is called “Going toward.”25 If during the thirteenth mental [moment], this is called “abiding in the fruit.”

21. The list of five superpowers varies in different Buddhist texts. A typical list is (1) divine seeing, (2) divine hearing, (3) ability to know other minds, (4) power to appear anywhere at will, and (5) virtuosity at religious practice.

22. Lance Cousins points out: “Compare Vibhanga 319 in Pali [the second work in the Abhidhamma of the Pali canon] where the five are given as asamklīththa-sankilesika, i.e., not defined but subject to defilement” (email correspondence, December 5, 2006).

23. Two important phases of practice discussed by most Buddhist schools are the Seeing Path (darsana-mārga) and Cultivation Path (bhāvanā-mārga), which one enters in that order. Most schools place enlightenment as occurring at the culmination of the Cultivation Path.

24. These are meditative practices. Ksānti is defined in Vātsiputriya texts as analyzing conditions while seeking joy; nāma involves using “names,” terms, or concepts as meditative objects, e.g., “suffering”; nimitta, which means “sign” or “image,” is described in the Short Version as “just as one sees someone familiar in a dream, or an image in a mirror, just so does one contemplate the nimitta of suffering.” Laukikā agra-dharmā is the highest insight into the nature of dharmas. As for the Vātsiputriya understanding of niyāmāvakrānti, it would seem to imply—judging from Xuanzang’s rendering—that it corresponds to ksāna-jhāna and anatipāda-jhāna, i.e., the cognitive condition in which all klesas have been fully eliminated (prahāna) and in which no new ones, or any future life, will arise. In some texts, this would define reaching Arhathood.

25. While some schools divide understanding the Four Noble Truths into sixteen “moments,” four for each Truth, the Vātsiputriyas applied three aspects to each Truth, yielding twelve moments of insight. The “thirteenth” would be full enlightenment.
In ways such as this, there are many different opinions. Because of holding different interpretations of a single verse, this school branched off into four schools, which are Dharmottariya (Higher Dharma), Bhadrayānīyas (Inheritance from the Honorables), Saṃmatiyas (Correct Measure), and the Śāṇḍagirikas (Hidden in Forests and Mountains).

That verse says:

Already liberated, again one backslides
backsliding due to desire. Again returning
recovering peaceful joy and the place of happiness.
From the enjoyable (postepiphany life) to perfect happiness.26

Bibliography and Suggested Reading


26. Although the exact meaning of every component of this verse is uncertain, it is clear that it concerns Arhats and the conditions by which they might backslide and subsequently regain their progress to go on to parinirvāṇa. The exact nature of the opposing interpretations, which must have revolved around defining aspects of enlightenment, is unknown, although some scholars have speculated. Priestley 1999: 36–37 summarizes Kuiji’s explanation of the differences.