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Bhāra Sutta

The Discourse on the Burden | S 22.22

Theme: There is no “person” in the aggregates

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2005

1 Introduction

1.1 In his well-acclaimed work, *How Buddhism Began*, **Richard Gombrich** points out the relationship between the Buddhist conception of *upādāna* (clinging) and its early Indian roots in metaphors of fuel and fire:

The word *upādāna* has both a concrete and an abstract meaning. In the abstract, it means attachment, grasping; in this sense it is much used in Buddhist dogmatics. Concretely, it means that which fuels this process. The PED sv: “(lit that [material] substratum by means of which an active process is kept alive and going), fuel, supply, provision.” So when the context deals with fire it simply means fuel...

In my opinion, it is clear that the term the term *khandha* too was a part of the fire metaphor. (Gombrich 1996:67)¹

1.2 Gombrich goes on to discuss the historical problem related to **the Bhāra Sutta** (S 22.22), where the aggregates are said to be a burden (*bhārā pañca-k,khandhā*) to be put down. The metaphor is more historically correct and spiritually more urgent when *upādāna-k,khandha* is translated as “the aggregates that are fuelled)” or even “the aggregates that are on fire (or burning).” It is a burden for the early brahmins to daily collect fuel (wood, herbs, etc) to feed the sacred fire (Gombrich 1996:67). Moreover, the flaming burden of fuel that one carries around has to be immediately “put down” and “put out.”²

1.3 The burden metaphor is often used to describe the arhat, who is said to “have put down the burden” (*ohita,bhāra*, BHS *odhṛta,bhāra*, Mvst 2:95,4).³ A well known synonym is *panna,bhāra*, used in the same way, as in **the Dhammapada**:

*ye dukkhassa pajānāti
idh’eva khayam attano
panna,bhāraṃ visam’yuttarṃ
tam ahaṃ brūmi brāhmaṇarṃ*

Who understands suffering’s
end for himself, even here,⁴
has put down the burden, bond-free—
him I call a brahmin. (Dh 402)

¹ Fire as a metaphor is also discussed by Gombrich 1987a:16-20. On *upādāna*, see **(Dve) Khandha S** (S 22.48), SD 17.1a (2.3).

² Similarly, in **(Khandha) Āditta S** (S 22.61/3:71) the aggregates are said to be on fire. Cf **Āditta,pariyāya S** (S 35.28/4:19 f)) where the 6 sense-organs, and their respective sense-objects, sense-consciousnesses, sense-contacts, feelings arising from the contacts are all burning with the fire of greed, hate, delusion and suffering. See SD 1.3 & Hamilton 2000:81, 101.

³ As in **arahaṃ khīṇ’āsavo...ohita,bhāro**, V 1:183 = D 3:83 (*kilesa,bhāro ca khandha,bhāro ca ohito assā ti ohita,bhāro*, DA 863,32) = M 1:4 = S 3:161 = A 1:144 (*ohita,bhāro ti khandha,bhāra.kilesa,bhāra.abhisāṅkhāra,-bhāra otāretvā t̥hito*, AA 2:235 = 3:380) = 3:359 = It 38 = Nc 256; **arahanto khīṇ’āsavā...ohita,bhārā**, M 1:141 = 226 = 339 = S 1:71 = A 4:362. See CPD: *ohita,bhāra* & PED: *arahant* II C, for more refs.

⁴ Alt tr for ab: “Who understands his own suffering’s end, even here [in this world], ...”

The Dhammapada Commentary glosses *panna, bhāra* as “having laid down the burden of the aggregates (*ohita, khandha, bhāra*, DhA 4:168).

2 Is there really a “person”?

2.1 PUGGALA, VĀDA

2.1.1 Although mainstream Buddhism denies the reality of the eternal soul (*atta*; Skt *ātman*), various groups in early Indian Buddhism, such as the Vātsīputrīya⁵ and its sub-branch, the Sāṃmitīya (*sammitīya*),⁶ felt the need to posit some kind of enduring entity to act as the basis for karma and rebirth. The notion of the *puggala* (Skt *pudgala*) evolved, and its proponents, generally known as the *puggala, vāda*⁷ or “personalist” school, appealed to this passage as proof for the existence of the *puggala*:

And what, bhikshus, **the carrier of the burden** (*bhāra, hāra*)? It should be said: the person (*puggala*), this venerable one (*āyasmā*) of such a name, of such a clan.

This, bhikshus, is called the carrier of the burden.

[§5]

2.1.2 Lance Cousins proposes that the earliest source for the *pudgala, vāda* controversy is **the Kathā, vatthu** (3rd century BCE) (1994:22). According to this text,⁸ the *pudgala, vādins* hold that the *puggala* or person is regarded as a real thing, neither identical to the aggregates nor different from them. The *pudgala* (P *puggala*), they claim, is an irreducible datum or a primary existent (*dharma*), and which persists through change, undergoes rebirth, and eventually attains nirvana.

2.1.3 The issue is complicated by the fact that **the Sāṃmitīya, nikāya Śāstra** (the Treatise of the Sāṃmitīya Sect)⁹ asserts that the *pudgala*, while existing as a dharma, is actually a conventional conceptual construct or secondary existent (*prajñapti*).¹⁰

2.1.4 According to Xuanzang, the Chinese pilgrim who visited India during the 7th century, around a quarter of the monks in Indian then belonged to the Vātsīputrīya-Sāṃmitīya lineage. However, as Gethin points out, it is well known amongst Buddhist practitioners that

a particular ordination lineage need not have meant that he automatically subscribed to the doctrinal positions associated with the ordination lineage. Not all monks ordained as Sa[m]mitīyas need have been *pudgalavādins*, just as not all Sarvāstivādins monks need necessarily have

⁵ P *Vajji, puttaka*, named after the teacher Vātsī, putra, and as such were unrelated to the namesake *Vajji, puttaka* (Skt *Vrji, puttaka*), whose conduct led to the convening of the Vaiśālī Council, 100 years after the Buddha’s passing. See THÍCH Thiên Châu 1996:5-10.

⁶ The **Sāṃmitīya**, like the others here, was one of the major groups with the Eighteen Schools of Early Buddhism (on which, see E J Thomas 1933:288-292 (App II)). It emerged around the late 1st cent BCE as an offshoot of the parent **Vātsīputrīya**, who were themselves an offshoot of the early **Sthavira** (Elders) school. Other schools that accepted the *pudgala* view included the Dharmottarīya, Bhadrāyanīya and Saṅṅāgārika (or Saṅṅagarika): see THÍCH Thiên Châu 1996:15-17.

⁷ I have used the lower case here because *pudgala, vāda* (like *sassata, vāda* or *uccheda, vāda*) was never really a sect or school in itself, but a view that was more commonly found, say amongst the Vātsīputrīyas than other sects.

⁸ Kvu 1.1.

⁹ Before 4th or 5th cent.

¹⁰ Potter et al 1999:355-357.

been *sarvāstivādins*. This last point is aptly illustrated by the fact that the contemporary Tibetan monks are ordained in the tradition of the Mūlasarvāstivādins (a sub-school of the ancient Sarvāstivāda), yet none would subscribe to the view that dharmas exist in the three times.

(1998:223)

2.2 KARMIC ACCOUNTABILITY

2.2.1 The best known extant *pudgala, vāda* text is found in Chinese translation,¹¹ that is, the Sānmí Dǐbù Lùn 三彌底部論, of which the Sanskrit reconstruction is **Sānmitīya, nikāya Śāstra**.¹² Another extant Chinese version of a *pudgala, vādin* work is the Sānfādù Lùn 三法度論, or in reconstructed Sanskrit, **Tri-dharmaka Śāstra**.¹³ Apparently, the *pudgala, vādins* kept their views somewhat open (and for good reason, as we shall examine next), for around the same time (late 4th century), Vasubandhu, in his **Abhidharma, kośa**, presents the *pudgala, vādins* as holding that the existence of the *pudgala* is neither as a primary existent (*dravya*) nor as a secondary existent (*prajñapti*).¹⁴

2.2.2 Despite the debate that raged through the early Buddhist centuries regarding *pudgala, vāda*, its proponents, from a survey of their own texts, have not really assumed any *ātman* view. Modern scholars are generally sympathetic towards the *pudgala, vādins*. Gethin, for example, proposes that “To some extent, the ‘person’ of the *pudgalavādins* might be seen as performing an analogous function to ‘possession’ [*prāpti*] seeds, or *bhavaṅga*” (1998:223).

2.2.3 Even more accommodating and instructive is **Paul Williams**, who writes:

And yet it seems to me that the Pudgalavādins were wrestling with genuine philosophical problems here, and their position is perhaps subtler than it is portrayed. The Vātsīputrīya-Sā[m]-mitīya tradition may have had a particular interest in Vinaya matters, in which case their concern with personhood could have been significant in terms of an interest in moral responsibility. It is indeed persons who engage in moral acts, and attain enlightenment. For moral responsibility there has to be some sense in which the *same person* receives reward and punishment as the one who did the original deed. It is persons who have experiences of love and hate. All this, as Pudgalavāda sources make clear, has to be taken as given. The question is, what is the status of personhood?...¹⁵

....One can only speak of personhood in dependence upon living beings, being with eg arms, legs, feelings and so on, even if personhood is not reducible to arms, legs, feelings, and so on. Thus personhood in itself is indeed indefinable, it is *sui generis*, and personhood can be spoken of, conceptualized in dependence upon the aggregates, without this making personhood a conceptual construction (*prajñapti*) in the way this is understood by other Buddhist schools, reducible to the aggregates.

Yet personhood is also not a separate reality (*dravya*) capable of being encountered apart from the aggregates. Personhood is not itself a conditioned thing in the way, eg the human body is, and for the Pudgalavādin personhood continues from life to life and into enlightenment. Nev-

¹¹ For a helpful study of this and other extant *pudgala, vāda* texts mentioned here, see THÍCH Thiên Châu 1996; see also LS Cousins 1994, esp n6.

¹² T32.1649.462a-473a. Tr in THÍCH Thiên Châu 1996:99-117.

¹³ T25.1506.15c-30a. Tr in THÍCH Thiên Châu 1996:33-84.

¹⁴ See Cousins 1994:18; Williams 2000:126-128.

¹⁵ Here Williams discusses the notion that “personhood is an irreducible datum,” mentioning P F Strawson, *Individuals: An essay in descriptive metaphysics*, London: Methuen, 1959.

ertheless personhood also could not be an unconditioned dharma or an *ātman*. For personhood is (possessed by) this person, Archibald or Freda, and it is the person Archibald who marries the person Freda, not some separate eternal reality marrying some separate eternal reality.

The Pudgalavādins found puzzlement and problems where their fellow Buddhists found clarity and simplicity. The problem with unclarity and puzzlement is that they can often seem absurd. But some absurdity, it seems to me, may be profounder than it seems. (2000:127 f)

2.3 MAINSTREAM REJECTION

2.3.1 This teaching was rejected by the other Buddhist schools, who see it as a camouflaged version of the *ātman*, the self of the non-Buddhist systems. The mainstream Buddhist schools hold that the person is a mere convention (*vohāra*) or concept (*paññatti*; Skt *prajñapti*) derived from (*upādāya*) the 5 aggregates. It is not a physical entity or real substance in its own right.

2.3.2 **The Kathāvatthu** (c 350 BCE), by Moggalīputta Tissa, is a Theravādins work which opens with a long refutation of the personalist view.¹⁶ There is an important discussion on it in **the Vijñāna, kāya** (c 2nd century BCE-1st century CE),¹⁷ an important Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma work, and also a long critique of *pudgala, vāda* in **the Abhidharma, kośa**, a Sarvāstivādin work by Vasubandhu (late 4th century).¹⁸ Śāntarakṣita, too, discusses the *pudgala, vāda* in his **Tattva, saṅgraha** (8th century).¹⁹ This *pudgala, vāda* is also mentioned in treatises on Indian Buddhist sects by Bhavya (Bhava, viveka) (c490-580) in his **Nikāya, bheda, vibhaṅga, vyākhyana**;²⁰ by Vasumitra (2nd century) in his **Samaya, bhedōparacana, cakra**;²¹ and by Vinītadeva (8th century) in his **Samaya, bhedōparacana, cakre Nikāya, bhedōpadarśana, saṅgraha**.²²

2.3.3 Although *pudgala, vāda* was eventually rejected, the question of karmic continuity persisted through Indian Buddhism. Although there is a dearth of *pudgala, vāda* texts, its peculiar doctrine was by no means rare in early Indian Buddhism. Amongst the best known of alternative views in this regard are the “storehouse consciousness” (*ālaya, vijñāna*) of the Yogācāra school, and the “embryonic Buddha” or “Buddha womb” (*tathāgata, garbha*) of the Mahāyāna.²³ The last view is controversial and is generally rejected, especially those who espouse early Buddhism.²⁴

2.4 SUTTA PASSAGES REFUTING THE “PERSON”

¹⁶ Kvu 1.1/1-69 = Kvu:SRD 8-63; KvuA 7-35 = KvuA:L 9-43. For a summary of Kvu 1.1, see James P McDermott, “Kathāvatthu” in Potter et al 1996: 265-275 (bk 1).

¹⁷ K Potter et al (ed) 1996:367-370.

¹⁸ Ch 9 = Abhk:Pr 1313-1380 (tr of the French Abhk:P by Louis de La Vallée Poussin). See esp Abhk:Pr 1329, where Bhāra S is alluded to. Vasubandhu’s autocommentary is called the Bhāṣya, while Yaśomitra wrote his own comy, the Vyākhyā.

¹⁹ *Tattva, saṅgraha* (Tib) Skt ed E Kṛṣṇamācārya, 2 vols, Gaekwad’s Oriental Series. Baroda: University of Baroda, 1926:336-349; tr Ganganatha Jha, 2 vols, Gaekwad’s Oriental Series. Baroda: University of Baroda, 1937-39. Its comy, *Tattva, saṅgraha Pañjikā* (Tib) Skt ed & tr is by Kamalśīla, published with the text (above). See Dutt 1978:189.

²⁰ Tr from the Tib by A Bareau, *Journal Asiatique* 1956:167 ff.

²¹ Tr from the Tib by A Bareau, *Journal Asiatique* 1954:235 ff. Chinese: T2031.

²² Tr A Bareau, *Journal Asiatique* 1956:192 ff.

²³ For further reading on the “personality” controversy, see (1) N Dutt 1978:184-206; (2) Peter Harvey 1995:36-38; (3) Rupert Gethin 1998:223; (4) Paul Williams 2000:124-128; (5) Encyclopedia of Buddhism, ed R E Buswell, Jr, 2003, sv.

²⁴ See **How Buddhism became Chinese**, SD 40b (2.3.2; 4.2; 6.1).

2.4.1 In the early suttas, there are numerous examples of denial of the self, and let us look at a few famous examples. In **the Vajirā Sutta** (S 5.10), the nun Vajirā defeats Māra when she declares:²⁵

<i>Dukkham eva hi sambhoti</i>	It is only suffering that arises,
<i>dukkham tiṭṭhati veti ca</i>	(Only) suffering remains and disappears.
<i>nāññatra dukkhā sambhoti</i>	There is no other but suffering that arises;
<i>nāññam dukkhā nirujjhatī ti</i>	None other but suffering that ceases.

(S 555/5.10/1:135)

In this stanza, “suffering” refers to the inherent unsatisfactoriness of the 5 aggregates of clinging.²⁶

2.4.2 Similarly, in **the Kaccāna,gotta Sutta** (S 12.15), the monk Kaccāna,gotta states that:

<i>Dukkham eva uppajjamānam uppajjati</i>	What arises is only suffering arising,
<i>dukkham nirujjhamānam nirujjhatī ti</i>	What ceases is only suffering ceasing.

(S 12.15,6/2:17), SD 16.13

Besides explaining that suffering (*dukkha*) here refers to the 5 aggregates of clinging, the Sutta commentary adds that what the noble disciple sees, when he reflects on his own existence, is not a self or a substantially existent person but only the arising and passing away of causal conditions (*paccay’uppanna,nirodha*) (of dependent arising) (SA 2:33).²⁷

2.4.3 When a “person” is mentioned in the suttas, it is used in a conventional sense, as it is stated in **the Jāna Suttas 1-2**, it is “craving that causes a person to be” (*taṇhā janeti purisaṃ*, S 1:37).²⁸ It is craving that causes a rebirth, constituting a “new” person, “of such a name, of such a clan,” that is, a series of mental states generated by the momentum of past karma and present conditions.

2.4.4 The Moliya Phagguna Sutta (S 12.12) contains an interesting dialogue between the Buddha and the monk Moliya Phagguna, which sheds some light on the *puḍgala,vāda* controversy:

“Bhante, who clings? (*ko nu kho bhante upādiyati*)”
 “Not a valid question (*na kallo pañho*),” the Blessed One said, “I do not say, ‘One craves.’ If I were to say, ‘One craves,’ then this question, ‘Bhante, who clings?’ would be valid. But I do not speak thus.
 Since I do not speak thus, someone should instead ask me thus:
 ‘Bhante, what is the condition that there is clinging? (*kim paccayā nu kho bhante upādānanti*)’—this would be a valid question.
 To this, the valid answer is:
 ‘With craving as condition, there is clinging;
 With clinging as condition, there is birth... Such as the arising of this whole mass of suffering.’”
 (S 12.12,7/2:14)

2.4.5 Rupert Gethin, in his study of “The five khandhas,” gives this instructive comment on the Bhāra Sutta, thus:

²⁵ See also **Selā**’s verses (S 548-551/1:134).

²⁶ This is also identical to the “heap of mere formations” (*suddha,saṅkhāra,puñja*) in S 553c/5.10/1:135, earlier on.

²⁷ See also **Cha,chakka S** (M 148/3:280-287) & **(Khandha) Na Tumha S 2** (S 22.33/3:33 f).

²⁸ **Jāna S 1** (S 192/1.55/1:37) = **Jāna S 2** (S 194/1.56/1:37).

The well known “burden” *sutta* is also in principle a variation of the four-truth theme, The burden (*bhāra*) is explained as the five *upādānakkhandhas* in according with its standing for *dukkha*, while clinging to the burden (*bhārādāna*) and laying down the burden (*bhāranikkhepana*) are explained according to the standard definitions of the second and third truths respectively. The troublesome taking up of the burden (*bhārāhāra*), defined as the person (*puggala*), is inserted between the first and the second truths, while the fourth truth is [omitted] altogether; thus the usual pattern is departed from. (1986:41)

Gethin continues (from “thus the usual pattern is departed from”) with a footnote, saying, “[T]his is to some extent explained if the *sutta* is viewed as an exposition of the accompanying verse—that statements in verse should not always conform to the patterns of *sutta* prose is not surprising.” (id)

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Bhāra Sutta

The Discourse on the Burden

S 22.22

1-2 At Sāvattthī.

There the Blessed One said this:

3 “Bhikshus, I will teach you

the burden,
the bearer of the burden,²⁹
the taking up of the burden, and
the laying down of the burden.³⁰

Listen to it.

3.2 And what, bhikshus, is **the burden**?

It should be said: the 5 aggregates of clinging.

4 What are the five? They are, namely:

- (1) The form aggregate of clinging;
- (2) The feeling aggregate of clinging;
- (3) The perception aggregate of clinging;
- (4) The formations aggregate of clinging;
- (5) The consciousness aggregate of clinging.

rūp’upādāna-k,khandha
vedan’upādāna-k,khandha
saññ’upādāna-k,khandha
saṅkhār’upādāna-k,khandha
viññāṇ’upādāna-k,khandha

This, bhikshus, is called the burden.³¹

²⁹ Steven Collins, in *Selfless Persons*, tr *bhāra,hāra* as “the bearing of the burden,” contending that *hāra* must here be understood as an action noun rather than as an agent noun (1982:165). However, this is unwarranted as SED besides defining *hāra* as an agent n, also defines it as “a carrier, a porter.” BHSD (*hāra* 2) too lists its meaning as an agent n. The agent n certainly fits the context better.

³⁰ *Bharaṃ ca vo bhikkhave desissāmi bhāra,hāraṃ ca bhār’ādānaṃ ca bhāra,nikkhepanaṃ ca.*

³¹ Comy: In what sense are these five aggregates of clinging called a burden? In the sense of having to be borne through maintenance (*parihāra,bhāriya*). For their maintenance—by being placed (*thāpana*), moved about (*gama-na*), seated (*nisidāpana*), laid to rest (*nipajjāpana*), bathed (*nhāpana*), adorned (*maṇḍana*), fed (*khādāpana*), nourished (*bhuñjāpana*), etc—is something to be borne. Thus, they are called a burden in the sense of having to be borne through maintenance. (SA 2:263)

5 And who, bhikshus, is **the bearer of the burden?**

It should be said: the person (*puggala*), this venerable one (*āyasmā*) of such a name, of such a clan. This, bhikshus, is called the carrier of the burden.³² [26]

6 And what, bhikshus, is **the taking up of the burden?**

It is this craving that leads to renewed existence [rebirth], accompanied by pleasure and lust, seeking delight here and there;

6.2 that is, craving for sense-pleasures, craving for existence, craving for non-existence [annihilation].

This, bhikshus, is called the taking up of the burden.³³

7 And what, bhikshus, is **the laying down of the burden?**

It is the utter fading away and ending of that very craving, giving it up, letting it go, being free from it, being detached from it.

This, bhikshus, is called the laying down of the burden.³⁴

8 The Blessed One said this. Having said this, the Sugata [well-gone], the Teacher, further said this:

The 5 aggregates are truly burdens,
and the burden-bearer is the person.
The taking up of the burden is suffering in the world.
The laying down of the burden is happiness.

Having laid down the heavy burden,
not taking up another burden,
having drawn out craving with its root,
one is without hunger, utterly cooled.³⁵

— evaṃ —

³² Comy: Thus, by the expression, “the bearer of the burden,” he shows the person to be a mere convention, going by the gotra of Kaṇhayana, or of Vacchayana, etc. For the “person” is so called because he “picks up” the burden of the aggregates at the moment of rebirth, maintains the burden by bathing, feeding, comforting it by seating and laying down for as long as ten, or twenty, or a hundred years, and then discards them at the moment of death, only to take up another burden of aggregates at the moment of rebirth. Thus “the carrier of the burden” has arisen. (SA 2:263 f). On the Puggala, vādin’s interpretation of this passage, see Intro 2.

³³ “The taking up of the burden” (*bhār’ādāna*). The passage here is the def of the 2nd noble truth. Comy: “**Seeking delight here and there**” (*tatra, tatrābhinandinī*) means having the habit of seeking delight in the place of rebirth or among the various objects, such as forms. “**Craving for sense-pleasures**” (*kāma, taṇhā*) means lust for the 5 cords of sense-pleasures. Lust for form-sphere existence or formless-sphere existence, attachment to dhyana, and lust accompanied by the eternalist view: this is called “**craving for existence**” (*bhava, taṇhā*). Lust accompanied by the annihilationist view is “**craving for annihilation** [extermination]” (*vibhava, taṇhā*). (SA 2:264). **Bodhi**: “This explanation of the last two kinds of craving seems to me too narrow. More likely, craving for existence should be understood as the principal desire to continue in existence (whether supported by a view or not), craving for extermination as the desire for a complete end to existence, based on an underlying assumption (not necessarily formulated as a view) that such extermination brings an end to a real ‘I.’” (S:B 1052 n38). See **Dhamma, cakka-p, pavattana S** (S 56.11), SD 1.1. See foll n.

³⁴ “The laying down of the burden” (*bhāra, nikkhepa*), ie nirvana; hence, here we have a def of the 3rd noble truth. Comy: All these terms are designations for nirvana. For, it must come to this (*tañ hi āgamma*), that craving fades away without remainder, ceases, is given up, is relinquished, is released; and here there is no reliance on sense-pleasures (*kām’ālaya*) or on views (*diṭṭh’ālaya*). For this reason, nirvana receives these names (SA 2:264). See **Dhamma, cakka-p, pavattana S** (S 56.11), SD 1.1. See prev n.

³⁵ Comy: The root of craving is ignorance. Craving along with its root is “drawn out” (*uddharitvā*) by the path of arhathood (SA 3:364).

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