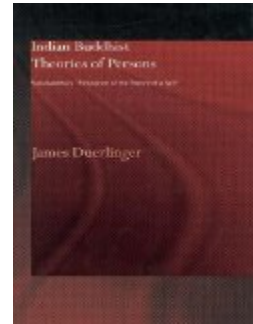


James Duerlinger. *Indian Buddhist Theories of Persons: Vasubandhu's 'Refutation of the Theory of a Self'*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. xii + 308 pp. \$37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-40611-6.

Reviewed by Richard P. Hayes (University of New Mexico)
Published on H-Buddhism (February, 2008)



Buddhist Controversies on the Nature of Self: A Guide

This work consists of a translation and study of the ninth chapter of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* *abh? ? ya?*. This text, which likely first circulated as a separate work, has come to be known under two titles: *Pudgalavini? caya* (decision on the person) and *?tmav? daprati? edha?* (refutation of the doctrine of self). The text begins with the claim that liberation (*mok? a*) is impossible apart from an understanding of Buddhist doctrine; this is because bondage is due to a false belief in a self, and all doctrines other than Buddhism hold that there is a self that is a reality over and above the physical body and consciousness. Vasubandhu's aim is to show why these doctrines of a separately existing self are untenable. Along the way, he offers a series of arguments against a view that he attributes to some Buddhists, namely, that there exists a person or individual (*pudgala*) the exact relationship of which to the physical body and consciousness cannot be expressed (*avaktavya*). In Vasubandhu's opinion, this notion of an indescribable or ineffable personal identity is indistinguishable from non-Buddhist doctrines of a self and must therefore be discarded along with those other doctrines. The proponents of the notion of an ineffable personal identity, in other words, are not truly Buddhist, or at least are not advocating a view that has the capability of informing practices that lead to *mok? a*.

The first attempt to bring Vasubandhu's arguments against an independent self to the attention of readers of English was Th. Stcherbatsky's 1919 treatise entitled "Soul Theory of the Buddhists." [1] Like so many of

Stcherbatsky's pioneering studies of Buddhist thought, "Soul Theory" was a remarkable work that still warrants being studied; it also served, however, to awaken the interests of later generations of scholars whose scholarly findings drew Stcherbatsky's conclusions into question. Moreover, Stcherbatsky's work was done some decades before the Sanskrit original of Vasubandhu's treatise was rediscovered and published. His work, like that of the later Belgian scholar Louis de La Vallée Poussin, published between 1923 and 1931, [2] was a translation of a translation; Leo Pruden's 1990 English translation of La Vallée Poussin's French translation of Xuanzang's Chinese translation of Vasubandhu's Sanskrit text was even further removed from the original. [3] A new translation of the text, directly from the Sanskrit, has therefore been a desideratum since the newly rediscovered Sanskrit text was published in 1967. That is what James Duerlinger has provided in this work; his is a translation of the Sanskrit text, albeit with consultation of Chinese and Tibetan translations of Vasubandhu's work and of most of its commentaries, only one of which is still extant in Sanskrit.

Duerlinger first published an English translation of Vasubandhu's *?tmav? daprati? edha?* in 1988 in the *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, and followed that with several installments of his own English commentary. [4] This book brings significantly revised versions of all those earlier publications together and furnishes them with an introductory chapter, an index, and a bibliography that is helpfully divided into sections according to the nature

of the works included in it. The two main divisions of the bibliography comprise references to primary texts, translations, and summaries; and to modern discussions. The first division is further divided into several subsections (representing Sanskrit editions, Chinese editions, Tibetan editions, and English translations and studies).

In his seventy-page introduction to his translation, Duerlinger discusses the textual history of Vasubandhu's text, its translations into Tibetan and Chinese, and the various editions, translations, and studies that have been done in modern languages. He then offers a long discussion of Vasubandhu's characterizations of the theories of persons held by the brahmanical Ny? ya-Vai? e? ikas and by the various Buddhist schools that have collectively come to be known as Pudgalav? dins (Personalists). The issue of whether Vasubandhu's characterizations of his opponents fairly represent their actual views is not the main focus of Duerlinger's discussion; rather, he seeks to explain their views as Vasubandhu saw them, so that the reader can make better sense of why Vasubandhu said what he said to refute them. That main focus notwithstanding, Duerlinger does offer a textual history of main works associated with the so-called Pudgalav? dins, and of Buddhists other than Vasubandhu who offered critiques of their position.

Subsequent sections of the introduction deal with Indian Buddhist theories of persons; the causal basis of the conception of persons; the theory of the five aggregates as the basis of the idea of personal identity; the problematic character of Vasubandhu's exchange with the Pudgalav? dins; problems within the Pudgalav? din view; and objections to Vasubandhu's view of persons. Finally, Duerlinger offers his own initial reflections on the various arguments used by Vasubandhu. He rightly observes that a study of Vasubandhu is only a first step in a much larger study of how coherent all the various Indian views, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, of personal identity are, and that it would be premature at this stage of our knowledge to try to assess which presentations are the most compelling. Arriving at conclusions, says Duerlinger, "needs to wait upon an equally careful study of the theories of persons of Candrak? rti, the Ny? ya-Vai? e? ikas, the S? ? khyas, the Jains, and the various schools of Ved? nta, along with the critique of Indian theories set out by ? ? ntarak? ita and Kamala? ? la" (p. 56). In addition, says Duerlinger, a critical philosophical assessment of the writings of Vasubandhu should be based on a careful study of the question of personal identity as discussed by a long series of Western philosophers. While no one is likely to arrive at his or own view of

personal identity solely on the basis of analyzing rational argumentation, says Duerlinger, and while few modern readers are likely to go the full distance of taking Vasubandhu's conclusions as their own, the study of a text such as Vasubandhu's is likely to be helpful to people as they try to sort out this very complex issue for themselves.

Taken as a whole, Duerlinger's introduction offers a very good overview of the issues discussed by Vasubandhu and those who preceded and followed him. It also provides a useful guide through the translation that follows. The translation itself is divided into five sections, which of course follow the structure of Vasubandhu's original text. The first section lays out Vasubandhu's own view of persons. This is followed by a section on Vasubandhu's objections to the Pudgalav? dins' theory. His critique of their view allows him to anticipate how they would object to his critique and how he would respond to their objections, which is the topic of the third section. The fourth section addresses the views of non-Buddhists, Vasubandhu's critiques thereof, and his replies to the objections he anticipates would in turn meet his critique. Concluding considerations are brought up in section five. The translation runs about fifty pages. The final hundred and ten pages contain Duerlinger's commentary on each of the first four of the five sections of the translation.

Before turning to a discussion of Duerlinger's translation, it may be helpful to make a few general observations about the serious challenges that any translator of ancient Indian philosophical texts faces. Perhaps the greatest single challenge comes from the fact that most of those texts were written for audiences of people who already had a good command of the issues and of the various positions taken by different schools of thought. Because readers (or hearers) of most texts could be assumed to know the background material very well, authors could refer to complex arguments just by referring to them in a few carefully chosen words. If a translator presenting a text to be read in our time were to provide a translation of just the words actually written in the original text, the resulting translation would in most cases be nearly unintelligible. There are various ways of working around this problem. One way is to follow the example of Chinese translators, who felt no hesitation in adding explanatory sentences of their own composition, often drawing on material to be found in commentaries. This was the method followed by Xuanzang in his translation of *Abhidharmako? a*—as a result of which, one finds that when comparing, say, La Vallée Poussin's French translation from Xuanzang's Chinese with a Sanskrit edition,

many sentences appear in the French for which there is no counterpart in the Sanskrit. Many modern translators follow a version of this method: they add explanatory material but enclose it in square brackets to distinguish it from the original text.

Duerlinger's translation makes liberal use of added explanatory material enclosed in square brackets. Indeed, in some passages there seems to be more material in square brackets than in the translated text in which the brackets are embedded. Different people will react to this kind of presentation differently. A while back I used Duerlinger's book as one of the textbooks in a graduate philosophy seminar on the Buddhist doctrine of *an? tman*. Students who knew little or no Sanskrit tended to find the translation somewhat cumbersome but nevertheless clear. Other students read the Sanskrit text and then checked their understanding against Duerlinger's. These latter students found all the material in square brackets distracting. On the basis of this rather small sample of experiences, I would hazard the tentative conclusion that a general philosophical audience may find Duerlinger's translation quite acceptable, while Sanskritists (who are usually by temperament obsessive and hypercritical anyway, just because it is difficult to read Sanskrit without being attentive to the smallest details) might find the translation somewhat less pleasing. Few translators can please all audiences. Duerlinger's translation strikes me as well suited for the audience he is apparently mostly trying to reach, namely, philosophers who are curious about what important Indian philosophers said, and perhaps modern Buddhists who wish to know more about the attempts to provide rational justifications of key Buddhist doctrines.

In his own commentary to the sections of the translation, Duerlinger makes a great effort to sort out the different positions and to supply all the implicit premises that would be necessary to make the arguments valid. His practice is to name all the various positions he identifies through his philosophical analysis, then to offer an abbreviation of the name. So, for example, he analyzes an argument that he calls the Ny? ya-Vai? e? ika "theory of the production of minds," which he then abbreviates as the TPM argument. The explicit and implicit premises of that argument are then referred to as TPM(I), TPM(II), TPM(III), and so on. Duerlinger's practice is to set the argument out in tabular form and then to offer reflections on the premises by referring back to their num-

ber. This style of presentation is quite common in analytic philosophy and linguistics. It requires work on the part of the reader to follow the discussions, for the reader must check back to the original presentation of the argument repeatedly (or else memorize it). If one is willing to do that work, then one is likely to find the presentations quite helpful while working through Duerlinger's insightful analyses of the cogency of the arguments.

Probably everyone who makes the effort to work through this book (and it does take some effort) will find points on which they disagree either with Vasubandhu or with Duerlinger's presentation of Vasubandhu, or with Duerlinger's assessment of the arguments as he presents them. That is part of what makes this a valuable study. It presents enough material to provide grist for good philosophical discussion and refrains from offering so much material that there is nothing left to discuss. If I may again draw on the experiences of my graduate class in philosophy, we found that Duerlinger's book gave us a good deal to think about, and some of our liveliest discussions were about passages in his book. (Because it is a good book to use in the classroom, it is fortunate that a relatively modestly priced paperback is available.)

In summary, the book does what it sets out to do. It does not provide the definitive study of the theories of self in Indian philosophy, much less a definitive answer to the philosophical question of just what a self is and why, if selves do not really exist, we cannot seem to get through the day without thinking they exist. What it does do is offer a good study of one Buddhist thinker from India, a study that makes intelligent use of the methods of analytic philosophy. One hopes that this study will be followed by others, either by Duerlinger himself or by others who follow his methods.

Notes

[1]. First published in Petrograd (Izvestiia Rossiiskoi akademii nauk, 1920), and available in many modern Indian reprint editions.

[2]. *L'Abhidharmako? a*, 6 vols. (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1923-1931).

[3]. *Abhidharmako? abh? ? ya* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991).

[4]. See, for example, James Duerlinger, "Vasubandhu's Refutation of the Theory of Selfhood," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 17 (1988): 129-187.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism>

Citation: Richard P. Hayes. Review of Duerlinger, James, *Indian Buddhist Theories of Persons: Vasubandhu's 'Refutation of the Theory of a Self'*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. February, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14209>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.