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How Did Chinese Buddhists Incorporate Indian Metaphors? A Study of Lushan Huiyuan's Use of Firewood–Fire Metaphors in the Shadow of Indian Canons

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Abstract: In the discourse of Lushan Huiyuan 廬山慧遠, the firewood–fire metaphor (*xinghuozhiyu* 薪火之喻) is employed to illustrate personhood (*shen* 神), referring to *pudgala*. Scholars often criticize Huiyuan for interpreting personhood as a true “self” (*ātman*) under the influence of the Vātsīputrīya school, thus contradicting the doctrine of non-self. This paper suggests that this might be a dual misunderstanding of both Huiyuan and the Vātsīputrīya school. Huiyuan's firewood–fire metaphor is indeed profoundly influenced by the Vātsīputrīyas' three kinds of designation. Yet, he never commits to the substantial self, and his argument primarily aims to refute the view of annihilationism (*duanmie* 斷滅), that is, that life ceases to exist after one period ends. This stance fully aligns with the doctrine of non-self that has been central since the inception of Buddhism. Additionally, Huiyuan's explanation of the indestructibility of personhood (*shen bumie* 神不滅) is a reluctant proposition; its fundamental purpose does not lie in discussing transmigration, but rather in demonstrating the state of “body and mind both cease” following the cessation of causes and conditions once “transmigration ends”.

Keywords: firewood–fire metaphor; Lushan Huiyuan 廬山慧遠; personhood (*shen* 神); Āgamas; Vātsīputrīya school; *pudgala*



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1. Introduction

Lushan Huiyuan's 廬山慧遠 (334–416) *Body Ends, Personhood Does Not Perish* (henceforth XJSBM, *Xingjin Shenbumie* 形盡神不滅) is the fifth essay in *Monk Does Not Bow Down Before a King* (henceforth BJWZL, *Shamen Bujing wangzhe Lun* 沙門不敬王者論). Its main theme appears to be very clear—it proposes a real soul as the subject of reincarnation. Meanwhile, due to his profound influence from the Abhidharma Scholar (*pitan xue* 毘曇學), Huiyuan is somewhat of a “controversial” figure in the study of Chinese Buddhism. He is undeniably a highly respected monk, for he holds strong Buddhist faith, strictly adheres to the disciplinary rules, disciplines himself rigorously, and devotes himself to the construction of Buddhist learning communities, setting a good example for later Buddhists. However, some Buddhist scholars believe that he could not correctly comprehend the profound meaning of *prajñā* and emptiness (*śūnyatā*); hence, several scholars criticize him. For example, Ren (1985, p. 700) points out that through **Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* (henceforth MPU, *Da Zhidu Lun* 大智度論), Huiyuan did not change his basic proposition of XJSBM; instead, it seems to have solidified his original view, which appears to be behind the conceptual and theoretical form similar to Nāgārjuna's *mādhyaṃaka* school *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (henceforth MMK, *Zhonglun* 中論).

Lushan Huiyuan utilized the firewood–fire metaphor twice in his works. The instance that has received the most attention is in XJSBM, where he used it to represent the term *shen* metaphorically. This has long been interpreted as his endorsement of a substantial soul, thereby expounding the viewpoint that his conception of the soul has a rich background in Chinese traditional culture's soul (*linghun* 靈魂), indistinguishable from the Indian non-Buddhist (*waidao* 外道) concept of *ātman*. Such criticism equates his discourse on

the soul with non-Buddhi, sharply negating his qualification as a Buddhist thinker. Even if Huiyuan provides some non-realist interpretations of personhood, influenced by the *prajñā* (Murakami 1962, p. 377), this methodology supremely prioritizes *prajñā* and *Mādhyamaka*, completely ignoring the overall anti-essentialist characteristic of Buddhism.

This study posits that the doctrine of *pudgala*¹ within the Vātsīputrīya school offers a cogent interpretation of the *Āgamas*. Huiyuan's concept of "personhood" (*shen*)² absorbs not only the *Āgamas* but also the Vātsīputrīya interpretation of the metaphor of firewood and fire. This is because his articulation of "personhood" aligns precisely with the Vātsīputrīya's three types of "designations" (*prajñapti, shishe* 施設)³ for the "indefinable aggregate". Although Huiyuan does not directly quote Buddhist canons to prove the firewood–fire metaphor, he uses Zhuangzi's metaphor for discussion. However, he asserts in XJSBM that "the metaphor of firewood and fire originates from the holy scriptures 火木之喻原自聖典" (T52. 2102. 31c25), emphasizing the Buddhist canonical origins⁴ of this metaphor. The firewood–fire metaphor indeed frequently appears in early Chinese translated Buddhist texts, and it is highly likely that Huiyuan had exposure to, learned from, and even participated in translating these works.

Due to the Vātsīputrīya school being widely regarded as heterodox within Buddhist traditions⁵, previous studies suggest that even if Huiyuan accurately understood the perspectives of the Vātsīputrīya, this does not imply that he embraced correct Buddhist thought.⁶ I argue that our misunderstanding of Huiyuan may have originated from our initial misconceptions about the Vātsīputrīya school. Therefore, it is essential to first clarify the doctrines of the Vātsīputrīya school before analyzing how it influenced Huiyuan.⁷ Therefore, while some scholars like Ren criticize Huiyuan for his interpretation of *shen*, this paper argues that such critiques may overlook the subtlety of Huiyuan's metaphoric use, which aligns with early Buddhist non-self concepts.

2. The Firewood–Fire Metaphor and *Pudgala* in Wei-Jin Translated Buddhist Scriptures

Fire, as one of the most common natural phenomena, is extensively found in the metaphors of various philosophical traditions worldwide. Hence, apart from Zhuangzi and Han-era figures using fire and combustible materials as metaphors, this metaphor's use in India is also quite widespread. Considering Huiyuan's Buddhist monastic status, his discursive aim, and his claim that the firewood–fire metaphor originates from the canons, the interpretation of his firewood–fire metaphor from within the Buddhist tradition has crucial, even decisive significance beyond perspectives offered by studies of the body–spirit relationship (*xingshen guanxi* 形神關係) and the Wei-Jin Neo-Daoism (*weijin xuanxue* 魏晉玄學)⁸.

2.1. The Firewood–Fire Metaphor Observed in the *Āgamas* Translated during the Wei-Jin Period

In Buddhism, fire is often used in metaphors that do not express positive meanings. For example, the *Ādittasuttam* (*Samyutta Nikāya* 35:28) in Theravāda Buddhism uses fire to denote afflictions such as greed, hatred, and ignorance, with the combustible materials being the dharmas of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind.⁹ Although this Sūtra does not explicitly use the firewood–fire metaphor, it already incorporates elements such as fire and fuel. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the fire metaphor is frequently used to denote worldly suffering, as in the "burning house of the three worlds 三界火宅" (T09. 262. 14c24–25) in the *Sad-dharma Puṇḍārika Sūtra* (*Miaofa Lianhua Jing* 妙法蓮華經).

The metaphor of firewood and fire in Huiyuan's XJSBM might have multiple sources. The overt source is the line of thought extending from Zhuangzi, Huan Tan 桓譚, and Wang Chong 王充 in Chinese intellectual history, particularly their metaphors involving fire and combustible materials.¹⁰ Huiyuan directly employed Zhuangzi's firewood and fire metaphor as an allegory for his argumentation. However, this might merely be a rhetorical strategy,¹¹ with its underlying objective remaining within the Buddhist doctrine. The covert source should originate from within Buddhism itself. Many examples of the fire-

wood and fire metaphor already existed in the documents Huiyuan could access. Kimura (1960, p. 395) noted this and found some examples in the MPU and the MMK.¹² Lo (1995, pp. 152–57) has provided a detailed summary of the firewood and fire metaphor, which Huiyuan might have come across.¹³ In fact, the firewood–fire metaphor can be found in the canons translated by the Lushan monastic community. For instance, in the *Madhyama Āgama* (henceforth MĀ, *Zhong'ahan Jing* 中阿含經) translated by Samghadeva, it says the following:

Just as when a fire is burning, [if] no more firewood is added, [it will] cease. Without firewood, the fire does not continue, this fire is said to be extinguished. 猶如火熾，不益薪則止，無薪火不傳，此火謂之滅。(T01. 26.608c26–27)

The aforementioned citation is a metaphor for the Buddha's *nirvāṇa*¹⁴ in the MĀ. Given that Samghadeva and Lushan Huiyuan had deep interactions,¹⁵ it is reasonable to infer that Huiyuan would be aware of the existence of such a metaphor in the canons. However, the description in the MĀ is quite brief, and therefore, we need to rely on other Āgamas to understand the main theme this metaphor expresses in the original Buddhist scriptures:

If there is a fire kindled before me, lit due to the conditions of firewood and grass, if no more firewood is added, the fire will then extinguish forever, never to arise again... matter has already ceased and is known, sensations, perceptions, volitions, and consciousness have already ceased and are known... 若有於我前然火，薪草因緣故然，若不增薪，火則永滅，不復更起，東方、南方、西方、北方去者，是則不然.....色已斷已知，受、想、行、識已斷已知... (T02. 99. 246a3–10)

Therefore, in this context, firewood refers to the five aggregates: matter, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness. In Buddha's view, the continuity of life is due to the persistence of the five aggregates. If the five aggregates no longer persist, then the fire would lack the firewood needed to continue burning, leading to its extinction. In another scripture from the *Samyukta Āgama* (henceforth SĀ, *Za' ahan Jing* 雜阿含經), the phrase “when the firewood is exhausted, the fire goes out 若不增薪，火則永滅” is used to metaphorically depict Buddha's *nirvāṇa*:

[Our Buddha has] transcended all celestial beings, Asuras, dragons, and yakshas, has established the inexhaustible Dharma, and the Buddha's work is now complete. Having achieved peace and extinction, the great compassionate one enters **nirvāṇa*, like a fire going out when the firewood is exhausted, and he ultimately achieves eternal residence. 度脫諸天人，修羅龍夜叉，建立無盡法，佛事既已終。於有得寂滅，大悲入涅槃，如薪盡火滅，畢竟得常住。(T02. 99. 167c7–10)

This scripture says, “When the firewood is exhausted, the fire goes out 薪盡火滅” to illustrate the event of Buddha exhausting all his deeds in the world, eventually attaining *nirvāṇa*. In original Buddhism,¹⁶ *nirvāṇa* is seen as the final extinction, with no conscious activity following it.¹⁷ Thus, the objects accompanying conscious activities also lose their significance.¹⁸ The following expression, often used in Āgamas to describe *nirvāṇa*,¹⁹ captures this:

My birth is exhausted, the pure conduct (**brahmacaryā*, *fanxing* 梵行) has been established, what had to be done has been done, and I know myself to be without future existence. 生已盡，梵行已立，所作已辦，不更受有。(T01. 26. 787b20–21)

Nirvāṇa refers to the state of no rebirth after extinguishment, meaning “cessation” or “extinction”. Original Buddhism did not view *nirvāṇa* as a higher state of existence but as the ultimate extinction. Thus, the “when the firewood is exhausted, the fire goes out” in the Āgamas is used to illustrate the final cessation of the residual five aggregates of the Buddha after his death in this life.

2.2. Fire and Pudgala: How Did the Vātsīputrīyas Accept the Firewood–Fire Metaphor from Āgamas

However, two hermeneutical gaps exist between the metaphor of firewood and fire in the Āgamas and Huiyuan’s use of it: First, how can the “firewood is exhausted, the fire goes out” used for Buddha’s five aggregates (body) in the Āgamas transition to the bodies of ordinary people? Second, how do the burning and extinction of the five aggregates lead to the concept of *pudgala*?

Regarding the first gap, this is because, in the perspective of the sect of the elders (*Sthavira Nikāya*) tradition²⁰, represented by the Sarvāstivāda, the Buddha and the arhats, even after eradicating all afflictions, still maintain their “earthly body”, comprising the five aggregates. Although Buddha’s disciples likewise praised universally affirmed his accomplishments, there is no doubt that, as far as the sect of the elders, represented by the Sarvāstivāda school, is concerned, the Buddha was unequivocally human.²¹ Therefore, even the earthly body of the Buddha, like the bodies of ordinary people, is outflowed. As pointed out in the **Vibhāṣā Śāstra* (henceforth VŚ, *Piposha Lun* 鞞婆沙論):

If the Buddha’s body was always free from outflow (**anāsrava*), then the **Anupamā* should not arouse lust, the **Aṅgulimāla* should not provoke anger, the **Garvita* should not incite arrogance, and **Uruvilvākāśyapa* should not stir up ignorance. Therefore, there is either lust, anger, ignorance, or arrogance present in this context, and hence, it is known that the Buddha’s body is outflowed (**āsrava*). 若佛身一向無漏者，彼無喻女不應起淫意、鶩掘魔不應起瞋恚、慢高兒不應起慢、郁鞞羅迦葉不應起痴意。如此，此中或有著、或有瞋、或痴、或有慢，以是故知佛身是有漏。(T28. 1547. 463b2–6)

The VŚ provides several examples of afflictions arising from the Buddha’s body to illustrate that the Buddha’s body is outflowed. In addition, the Buddha faced numerous hardships during his last life, which stemmed from his past negative karma, and he had to suffer due to these negative actions in his final life. These hardships include being slandered by Sundarī, and falsely accused by Ciñcā, getting his foot injured by Devadatta, his foot being pricked by Acacia needles, suffering from headaches and rheumatism, having to eat horse fodder at Verañjā, enduring six years of ascetic practices, begging for food in a Brahmin settlement, and returning with an empty bowl.²²

Therefore, although the Āgamas use firewood as a metaphor for the Buddha’s body, there is no essential difference between the five aggregates of ordinary people and the Buddha’s life body in the view of the sect of the elders (such as Sarvāstivāda and Theravāda). Hence, this metaphor naturally applies to the five aggregates of ordinary people.

The second gap points to the relationship between *pudgala* and the five aggregates. Buddhist scholars tend to characterize this relationship mainly in three ways: first, similar to the non-Buddhist view of the substantial “self” independent from the aggregates (*dravyāntara ātman*); second, akin to the Sarvāstivāda school’s view of the hypothetical self (*ātmaprajñapti*); and third, similar to the Vātsīputrīya school’s term *pudgala*. These schools differ in their use of the term *pudgala*. In non-Buddhist traditions, *pudgala* may more closely resemble a soul, capable of existing independently of the body. For the Sarvāstivāda school, *pudgala* does not exist; what is referred to as *pudgala* is simply another way of expressing the five aggregates. The Vātsīputrīya school, however, holds a view distinct from these two, positing that the relationship between *pudgala* and the five aggregates is neither identical nor different.

Some scholars have recognized that Huiyuan’s personhood was influenced by the Vātsīputrīya school’s “indefinable self (*bukeshuo wo* 不可說我)” (Lü 1979, pp. 152–53; Sheng 2010, p. 260), as Huiyuan expressed his admiration for the Vātsīputrīya school’s TDŚ (Lü 1979, pp. 74–76) but often lacks meticulous argumentation. The Vātsīputrīyas habitually use the fire and firewood metaphor to express the relationship between the five aggregates and the “indefinable aggregate (*bukeshuo yun* 不可說蘊)”.²³

First of all, The TDŚ of the Vātsīputrīya school lists the *pudgala* alongside conditioned and unconditioned dharma as the third type of indefinable dharma. It proposes three ways to establish the existence of the *pudgala*:

The indefinable (**avaktaavya, *avācya*) is the designation through sensation (**vedanā prajñāpyte*), designation through the past (**atītaḥ prajñāpyte*), and designation through extinction (**nirodhaḥ prajñāpyte*). If one does not understand the designation through sensation, through the past, and through extinction, it is termed indefinable ignorance. The designation through sensation refers to sentient beings who have already received the aggregates, spheres, and elements, reckoning one and the rest. The designation through the past refers to the past aggregates, spheres, and elements. As stated, “At that time, I was called Quxuntuo”.²⁴ The establishment through extinction refers to the saying due to reception, as stated, “The Blessed One entered **nirvāna*”. 不可說者，受、過去、滅施設。受施設、過去施設、滅施設，若不知者，是謂不可說不知。受施設者，眾生已受陰、界、入，計一及余。過去施設者，因過去陰、界、入說。如所說，我於爾時名瞿旬陀。滅施設者，若已滅是，因受說。如所說，世尊般涅槃。(T25. 1506. 24a29-b8)

The designation through sensation refers to the construction of the *pudgala* based on the aggregates, spheres, and elements that sentient beings perceive, emphasizing the inseparable relationship between the *pudgala* and the five aggregates. The designation through the past constructs the *pudgala* based on the aggregates, spheres, and realms perceived by sentient beings in the past, which likely refers to past lives since the text uses the typical phrasing from the Jataka tales where the Buddha says, “At that time, I was called X”. The designation through extinction constructs the *pudgala* for sentient beings in the state of *nirvāna*. It is only through these means that we can discuss what someone’s past state was like, what their present state is like, and whether they have entered *nirvāna*.

However, due to the paucity of the Vātsīputrīya school’s texts in the existing Buddhist scriptures, we are unable to find the fire and firewood metaphor in the Vātsīputrīya school’s literature from Huiyuan’s time or earlier. However, four indirect pieces of evidence suggest that this metaphor was popular within the Vātsīputrīya school.

Firstly, two pieces of evidence come from the Vātsīputrīya school system. The first piece of evidence comes from the discussion of the final state of Buddha or an Arhat in the TDŚ:

The one who completely eradicates all afflictions, due to having realized, has a remainder. This is called “with the remainder”. Without remainder means that when this sensation of aggregates is abandoned, it does not continue like an extinguished lamp. This is **nirvāna* without remainder. 無余者，若此受陰捨，更不相續如燈滅，是涅槃此名無余。(T25. 150. 24a26–28)

Although the TDŚ does not delve into the issue of the Arhat’s physical death and mental extinction, the metaphor of the “extinguished lamp” is highly similar to the expression “the fire goes out when the firewood is exhausted” in the Āgamas. A lit lamp contains both fuel and fire. Therefore, according to Kimura, the example in the MMK and MPU where a lamp is used as a metaphor for the five aggregates serves as a source for Huiyuan’s firewood and fire metaphors. In my view, this cannot be taken as direct evidence but rather as indirect evidence because the MPU does not directly mention firewood and fire, just as the mention of “lamps” in the TDŚ could also be seen as indirect evidence. Moreover, in fact, Huiyuan had a closer connection with the TDŚ than with the MPU. According to Buddhist historical texts, the TDŚ was translated at Huiyuan’s request, and he also wrote a preface for this treatise.

The second piece of evidence comes from the Saṃmatīya school, a sub-school of the Vātsīputrīya school,²⁵ whose treatise **Saṃmitīya Nikāya Śāstra* (henceforth SNŚ, *Sanmīdi Bu Lun* 三彌底部論) introduces three types of person similar to those in the SNŚ:

There is the person designated through dependence (**āśrayaprajñāptapudgala*), the person designated through transmigration (**saṅkramaprajñāptapudgala*), and

the person designated through extinction (**nirodhaprajñaptapudgala*). 依說人、度說人、滅說人。(T32. 1649. 466b2)

The person designated through dependence corresponds to the designation through sensation in the TDŚ, indicating that the five aggregates serve as the foundation upon which the *pudgala* is established, with their primary function being to integrate the five aggregates. The person designated through transmigration corresponds to the designation through the past in the TDŚ, indicating that there is a *pudgala* that has passed through the past, present, and future. The person designated through extinction corresponds to the designation through extinction in the TDŚ. This refers to the *pudgala*, or the person, that ceases to exist concurrently with the extinction of the five aggregates upon reaching *nirvāṇa*. This is, in essence, the object of extinction in *nirvāṇa*. (See J. Li 2021, p. 13)

In the discussion of the person designated through dependence, the Saṃmatīya school refers to the fire metaphor (*huopi* 火譬).²⁶ Although the details of the fire metaphor are not mentioned here, the person designated through dependence elaborates on the relationship between the *pudgala* and the five aggregates. There are also another two indirect pieces of evidence from an opponent of the Vātsīputrīya school that can reveal the metaphorical content of the fire metaphor, though it does not originate from the Vātsīputrīya school itself.

Third, the chapter Examination of Fire and Firewood (*Agnīndhanaparīkṣā nāma daśamam prakaraṇam*) in the MMK is often regarded as a refutation of the Vātsīputrīya's argument for the "indefinable aggregate"²⁷:

If the fire (*agni*) becomes the firewood (*indhana*), there is unity between the doer (*kartr*) and the action (*karmanah*). If, however, the fire is different from the firewood, then it can exist independently of the firewood. *yadīndhanam bhaved agnir ekatvam karṭṛkarmanoh, anyas ced indhanād agnir indhanād apy ṛte bhavet.* (MMK 10.1) 若燃是可燃，作作者則一；若燃異可燃，離可燃有燃。(T30. 1564. 14c4–5)

In the opposing view, fire is used as a metaphor for *pudgala*, which is the result of combustion, while firewood is used as a metaphor for the five aggregates. The MMK later provides a detailed refutation of this metaphor.

The fourth one is in the *Ātmavādapratishedha* (*Chapter on Refutation of the Self*) of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (Henceforth AKBh, *Apidamo Jushe Lun* 阿毘達磨俱舍論), where Vasubandhu presents the Vātsīputrīya school's fire and firewood metaphor while refuting their concept of *pudgala* and uses the metaphor to illustrate this concept:

Just as a fire is understood through its firewood, so too is a person (*pudgala*) understood by taking up the aggregates... *yathendhanam upādāyāgnih prajñāpyate evam skadhān upādāya pudgalaḥ iti...* (Pradhan 1967, p. 479) 故彼所言：如依薪立火，如是依蘊立補特伽羅。(T29. 1558. 152c23–29)

Despite the two to three hundred years that separate the MMK and the AKBh, this metaphor continues to circulate within the Vātsīputrīya school, reflecting its significance to this school. It is also presented in the canon of the Saṃmatīya school, a sub-school of the Vātsīputrīya school, which strongly suggests the established position of this metaphor within the Vātsīputrīya tradition. It is highly plausible that Huiyuan and Saṃghadeva obtained a detailed understanding of the Vātsīputrīya tenets from Saṃghadeva during the translation process of the TDŚ.

2.3. Substantiality or Designation: The *Pudgala* of the Vātsīputrīyas

Historically, Buddhist traditions have often designated the Vātsīputrīya school as proponents of self-affirmation due to their use of the term *pudgala*, and thus viewed them as "heresy". However, such criticism essentially imposes the definitions and positions of *pudgala* from other sects onto this school. However, such criticism fundamentally imposes the definition and position of *pudgala* from different sects onto this school. The TDŚ uses the concept of "designation" to describe the *pudgala*. In the chapter on the refutation of the *pudgala* in the TDŚ, Vasubandhu summarizes the Vātsīputrīya school perspective as

designating the aggregates as *pudgala* in the same way as fire is designated (*upādāyāgnih prajñāpyate evam skadhān upādāya pudgalah*). This concept is also found in MMK²⁸:

That which is dependently co-arisen, we declare to be emptiness. That is a dependent designation. That itself is the middle way. *yah pratītyasamutpādaḥ sūnyatām tām pracakṣmahe, sā prajñaptir upādāya pratīpat saiva madhyamā*. (MMK 24:18)
眾因緣生法，我說即是無，亦為是假名，亦是中道義。(T30. 1564. 33b11–12)

In the MMK, the term “dependent designation” (*prajñaptir upādāya*)²⁹ is used to express the notion of conceptuality, which Kumārajīva translated as “provisional names. (*Ji-aming* 假名)” If *pudgala* is merely considered a conceptual designation, it holds no substantial status. Priestley (1999, p. 324) notes that the Vātsīputrīya school did not agree with this view, as *pudgala* performs the function of the subject of rebirth and thus cannot be merely a nominal concept. Possibly influenced by the Sarvāstivāda critique of illusory concepts, from the time of Vasubandhu, the Vātsīputrīya no longer regarded *pudgala* as a “designation” but as a “substance” (*dravya*). However, this assertion does not withstand scrutiny, as in the *Mahāvibhāṣā Śāstra*, the Sarvāstivāda already considered the Vātsīputrīya’s view of *pudgala* as “substance”.³⁰ Therefore, this might simply be a conclusion drawn from the perspective of Sarvāstivāda scholars looking at the Vātsīputrīya school, which could fundamentally differ in underlying logic from the Sarvāstivāda school.

Even if the Vātsīputrīya school regards *pudgala* as a dharma, such dharma should also be considered a designated dharma.³¹ Just as Nāgārjuna’s “*prajñaptir upādāya*” differs from the non-Buddhist view that names and conventions are real as stipulated with Brahma, the Vātsīputrīya’s *pudgala* differs from the non-Buddhist notion of an intrinsic self (*ātman*) independent from the aggregates, merely representing a functionally designated dharma. It is distinct from the Sarvāstivāda school’s dharmas like form and sensation, which are not “substances” (*dravya*), but it can be described as dharma due to its specific functions, distinct from the five aggregates.

Moreover, the Vātsīputrīya school views the aggregates, spheres, and elements as “designations”,³² and the TDŚ also refers to the three dharmas (*sanfa*, 三法) as “imagination”³³. Our understanding of the Vātsīputrīya’s dharma as a substance may be based on its similarities with the Sarvāstivāda school.³⁴ Even though the Vātsīputrīya school and the Sarvāstivāda school have the same dharma names and numbers, this does not mean that the ontological structure of these two schools is consistent, which might suggest that the Vātsīputrīya’s concept of “designation” is similar to the Sarvāstivāda’s “substance” (*dravya*) as a basis for logical argumentation.³⁵ Therefore, the Vātsīputrīya’s view of the basic dharma characteristics as designations means that the *pudgala* is a designation upon a designation. Therefore, although the Vātsīputrīya school admits the *pudgala*, this is likely to be essentially different from the Hindu’s emphasis on the “self” which is independent real existence.

3. The Relationship between *Shen* and *Pudgala*: How Huiyuan Accepted the Teachings and Metaphor of the Vātsīputrīyas

Huiyuan is undoubtedly a representative of the Interpretation of Buddhism during the Eastern Jin Dynasty; hence, the real essence of Buddhism he sought to express is often concealed within his usage of Chinese philosophical terms. Unlike Sengzhao 僧肇, who lived around the same period, Huiyuan rarely quoted Buddhist scriptures in his independent works but instead made extensive references to the three profound studies (*Sanxuan* 三玄), making his texts more elusive. However, I believe that the essence of the “meaning matching” (*geyi* 格義) of Buddhism lies in expressing Indian Buddhist teachings through traditional Chinese philosophical concepts, rather than any form of Sinicized doctrines.

Existing scholarship is not lacking in studies on Huiyuan’s concept of “personhood”, among which Japanese scholar Ukai (2001, pp. 3–17) believes that the personhood discussed by Huiyuan in Three Periods of Retribution (*Sanbao Lun* 三報論) and BJWZL does not represent the ultimate emptiness wisdom of *prajñā*’s observation but rather appears to be more of an entity, containing elements of the unpredictable and ineffable divinities

found in traditional Chinese thought. However, the author also points out that there are some differences between Huiyuan's term *shen* and the traditional Chinese view of the soul. The traditional Chinese view of the soul is more concrete, while Huiyuan's "personhood" is more mysterious and unfathomable, not an eternal and unchanging substance, but one that operates within phenomena and ultimately connects with the ultimate *nirvāna*. In my view, Ukai's research has indeed grasped the characteristic of Huiyuan's personhood that differs from the *shen* in Daoism, but this characteristic is not specific enough.

I argue that Huiyuan's firewood and fire metaphor aptly illustrates the concept of personhood as described in the Vātsīputrīya school's *pudgala*, and fully corresponds to the three forms of designation postulated by the Vātsīputrīya school, thus accurately representing their teachings. This is a paradigmatic example of the influence of Indian Buddhism on Chinese thought. The misunderstanding of Huiyuan's work in previous research is often because the Indian teachings expressed by Huiyuan belonged to a school considered "heresy" by later Buddhism, rather than what was considered the orthodox *prajñā* tradition of his time.

3.1. Unify the Five Skandhas: The Similarity between Huiyuan's Term *Shen* as "Animating Things and Moved by Things, Operating under Borrowing Numerals" and the Vātsīputrīya's Notion of *Pudgala* as "Designation through Sensation"

In XJSBM, Huiyuan mainly discusses his view on personhood, where he employs the firewood and fire metaphor. The discussion revolves around the independence of personhood. Huiyuan's opponent first points out the following:

the subtle (*jing* 精) and the coarse (*cu* 粗), being of the same *qi*, inhabit the same dwelling throughout. When the dwelling is intact, *qi* gathers and there is spirit (*ling* 靈); when the dwelling is destroyed, *qi* disperses and the illumination (*zhao* 照) is extinguished. Once dispersed, it returns to its source in the great origin, once extinguished, it returns to nothingness. 精粗一氣始終同宅，宅全則氣聚而有靈，宅毀則氣散而照滅，散則反所受於大本，滅則復歸於無物。(T52. 2102. 31b18–21)

In the view of Huiyuan's opponent, personhood is dependent on the body (*xing* 形), completely lacking independence; hence, it inhabits the same dwelling throughout. Huiyuan first describes his view of personhood:

What is this so-called personhood? It is that which is extremely subtle and thus constitutes a spirit. Being extremely subtle, it is not something that can be depicted through hexagrams (*guaxiang* 卦象). Therefore, the sage describes it stimulates things (*miaowu* 妙物), even though those with supreme wisdom cannot ascertain its bodily form or exhaustively discuss its profound workings. This leads to widespread doubt and confusion among common people, such slander is deeply rooted. If one were to speak about it, it would indeed be speaking of the unspeakable (*bukeyan* 不可言). 夫神者何邪?精極而為靈者也。精極則非卦象之所圖。故聖人以妙物而為言，雖有上智猶不能定其體狀窮其幽致，而談者以常識生疑多同自亂，其為誣也，亦已深矣，將欲言之，是乃言夫不可言。(T52. 2102. 31c2–6)

According to Huiyuan, personhood is extremely subtle and cannot be manifested in a concrete form. Therefore, the sage uses the ability of personhood to subtly facilitate all things to describe it. In the aforementioned passage, things (*wu* 物) refer to the composite of body and spirit (personhood in a particular person), typically understood as the concept of sentient beings in Buddhism or generally meaning "person".³⁶ The sage portrays personhood as a subtle existence, which even the wisest cannot understand the state of or exhaustively describe the profundity of. Personhood is constantly changing and stimulates sentient beings, but itself is not a specific entity. It is an incredibly subtle existence that cannot be named; therefore, it is called the "unspeakable". This is similar to the Vātsīputrīya school's "indefinable aggregate". This kind of description seems to be referring

to personhood as a mysterious independent existence that is beyond the body. However, Huiyuan subsequently points out the following:

Personhood is something that is fully responsive yet without a master, completely subtle yet without a name. It animates things (*ganwu* 感物) and moves, and it operates under borrowing numerals (*jiashu* 假數). 神也者圓應無主，妙盡無名，感物而動，假數而行。(T52. 2102. 31c7–9)

Numerals (*shu* 數) refer to the materials of the body, including the five aggregates, twelve sense bases, eighteen elements, and so forth. The concept referred to as “animating things” entails the gathering of specific “numerals” into a unity, thereby forming a unified “person”. This process corresponds to the unification of the five skandhas (aggregates). This passage reveals that Huiyuan’s concept of the body does not possess independence from the five aggregates like non-Buddhist theories. It must manifest as a body and operate through principles such as the four great elements. Huiyuan aims to demonstrate that he does not oppose the view that body and spirit are inseparable.

In earlier Chinese philosophical literature, there is no shortage of works emphasizing the inseparability of body and spirit. For example, Huan Tan and Wang Chong of the Eastern Han Dynasty pointed out the following:

The spirit residing in the physical body is like the fire in a candle. If well-supported and protected, the candle can burn without being extinguished. Without the candle, the fire cannot independently travel in the void, nor can it light the candle again. The extinguished candle is akin to an old person, with falling teeth and graying hair, muscles withered and waned. The spirit can no longer nourish it, permeating inside and outside. The life force dries up and dies, just as the fire and candle both come to an end. 精神居形體，猶火之然燭矣。如善扶持，隨火而側之，可毋滅而竟燭。燭無，火亦不能獨行於虛空，又不能復然其燭。燭猶人之耆老，齒墮發白，肌肉枯臘，而精神弗為之能潤澤，內外周遍，則氣索而死，如火燭之俱盡矣。(Huan 2009, p. 32)

The body needs the *qi* to the body, the *qi* needs the body to be perceived. There is no solitary burning fire under the heaven, how can there be an intangible solitary perceiving spirit in the world? 形須氣而成，氣須形而知。天下無獨燃之火，世間安得有無體獨知之精？(Wang 1990, p. 875)

For Huan Tan and Wang Chong, although there is a distinction between body and spirit, overall, they still hold the view that the spirit is inseparable from the body, much like how fire cannot exist without a candle. The changes in Huan Tan’s candle are seen by Buddhists as an accurate depiction of the realities of birth, aging, illness, and death in sentient life. Lo (1995, p. 149) believes that Huiyuan opposed Huan Tan’s candle–fire metaphor (*zhuhuo zhiyu* 燭火之喻), but in my view, Huiyuan probably would not deny the inseparability of body and spirit. Huiyuan also would not think that body and spirit can be separated, which is precisely the Vātsīputrīya school’s doctrine of *pudgala* and the Five Skandhas being “not different” (*buyi* 不異). In this sense, the role played by personhood is akin to that of the spirit, functioning to respond to and integrate the five aggregates, and consequently unifying them into a composite person.

3.2. Rejection of Annihilation Views: The Similarity between Huiyuan’s Shen in Its Function of “Postmortem Transmigration” and the Vātsīputrīya’s Pudgala as “Designation of the Past”

However, the real divergence between Huiyuan and his opponent in XJSBM lies in, apart from the inseparability of the *pudgala* and the Five Aggregates, the “non-identity” that is the transmigration between different sentient beings. Following the above, Huiyuan immediately points out the following:

[Personhood] animating things sentient but is not a thing, hence things transmigrate (*hua* 化) but do not perish. [It] borrows numerals but is not a numeral, thus [this life’s] numerals end but it does not cease. [神]感物而非物，故物化而不滅，假數而非數，故數盡而不窮。(T52. 2102. 31c8–9)

In this context, transmigration refers to reincarnation. In Huiyuan's perspective, although personhood can integrate the five aggregates and govern the activities of people, it is distinct from the body represented by people and the five aggregates. Therefore, when the body ceases, personhood does not cease to exist, and it enters the process of reincarnation. The five aggregates cannot be transferred to the next sentient being, but the personhood can, which Huiyuan refers to as a "postmortem transmigration" (*mingyi* 冥移)³⁷:

Personhood has the function of postmortem transmigration. 神有冥移之功。
(T52. 2102. 31c13)

Huiyuan expounds on his relationship between body and personhood. In Huiyuan's view, the major mistake of the annihilators of the spirit is to deny the function of postmortem transmigration. Postmortem transmigration may seem to emphasize the separation of body and personhood, but it is not so. Postmortem transmigration here only means that personhood can inhabit different bodies, whereas the separation of body and personhood assumes that personhood can survive independently outside the body. Therefore, Huiyuan's theory of postmortem transmigration does not acknowledge the doctrine of a real soul that exists separately from the aggregates. In the process of reincarnation, the lives of both worlds must necessarily borrow their own body. The continuation of personhood is not derived from its substantial essence but from its function as a postmortem transmigration. Just as in the Vātsīputrīya school, reincarnation is similarly termed "designation".³⁸

Postmortem transmigration equates to the designation of the past in the TDŚ. The Vātsīputrīya school, through this, designates the "consistency" of five different aggregates throughout the process of rebirth in multiple lifetimes. Just as the TDŚ uses the Buddha's past lives as evidence, this kind of "consistency" certainly lacks absolute reality, and is, therefore, a "designation". The Buddha and his past lives are two different sentient beings. Subsequently, he uses the metaphor of transmission of fire from one piece of firewood to another:

The transmission of fire to different firewood is like the transmission of personhood to different bodies. If the preceding firewood is not the succeeding firewood, then we know the art of pointing to the end is subtle, the preceding body is not the succeeding body. 火之傳異薪，猶神之傳異形，前薪非後薪，則知指窮之術妙，前形非後形。(T52. 2102. 32a1–3)

Therefore, in Huiyuan's view, the most important function of personhood is to transfer from one body to another, a process analogous to the transfer of fire between different pieces of firewood. In previous research, this theory is seen as a blend of Buddhist Buddha nature, Wei-Jin Neo-Daoism original non-being (*benwu* 本無), and the idea of the soul in traditional Chinese religions. It is from this that Huiyuan's notion of a real "soul" is argued and is considered to be in violation of Buddhist teachings and a non-Buddhist view. It is even further revealed that Huiyuan's opponents' understanding of firewood and fire may be more in line with the description of "when firewood is exhausted, the fire goes out" in the *Āgamas*:

The personhood's dwelling in the body is like fire's existence in wood, its birth must be concurrent, and its destruction must be simultaneous. When the body departs, the personhood disperses with nowhere to dwell, when the wood decays, the fire subsides with no support, this is the logical result. 神之處形，猶火之在木，其生必並，其毀必滅。形離則神散而罔寄，木朽則火寂而靡托，理之然矣。(T52. 2102. 31b22–24)

In the view of Huiyuan's opponents, personhood exists within a specific body, much like fire resides in wood. Their birth must coexist, and their extinction must happen simultaneously. Therefore, when the body is gone, the personhood will scatter with nowhere to reside; when the wood decays, the fire will extinguish, having nowhere to depend on. This appears more akin to the earlier stated discourse in the *Āgamas* of "as the fire goes out

when the firewood is exhausted, thereby gaining eternal residence”, because both stress that fire relies on firewood and “when firewood is exhausted, the fire goes out”. However, in reality, Huiyuan’s use of the firewood–fire metaphor was certainly not to emphasize the personhood being independent from the body as a substantial “self” independent from the aggregates. As his opponents stated, “When the wood decays, the fire quiets with no support” —a worldly metaphor representing an objective phenomenon that Huiyuan would likely not dispute. It appears that Huiyuan intended to emphasize that the decay of the wood is not a trivial matter. If one believes that personhood is extinguished after this life, this view is incorrect. Therefore, just as the Vātsīputrīya school’s designation of the past merely designates the relationship of past and future lives in the cycle of rebirth, Huiyuan’s fire transmission also largely expresses similar implications.

Neither the *Āgamas* nor Huiyuan’s XJSBM offer general discourses on the body–spirit relationship; instead, they provide context-specific discussions. The fire going out when the firewood is exhausted in the *Āgamas* applies to the time of Buddha’s *nirvāṇa*; only then can it be said that all firewood is burned out, and the fire finally extinguishes. Huiyuan’s opponent’s so-called fire on the wood emphasizes the correspondence between fire and wood. XJSBM does not abstractly stress the soul as a substance existing outside the body, ruling over the body. I believe that Huiyuan later reveals the purpose of writing this thesis:

Those who are deluded see the body decay in one life and assume that both the personhood and emotion have completely vanished, just as they see the fire exhaust one piece of wood and assume it is completely extinguished. 惑者見形朽於一生，便以為神情具喪，猶觀火窮於一木，謂終期都盡耳。(T52. 2102. 32a4–5)

In Huiyuan’s view, those who are confused see the body of this one lifetime perish and assume that both the personhood and body have disappeared, considering this the ultimate extinction, much like those who believe fire exists only on this one piece of wood. The *Āgamas*’ phrase “when the firewood is exhausted, the fire goes out” refers to all firewood being burned out, and no new wood remaining, serving as a metaphor for the Buddha’s final life achieving *nirvāṇa*. However, Huiyuan’s opponents do not fall into this category but rather use any piece of wood as a metaphor indicating that life no longer possesses a personhood upon death. Huiyuan emphasizes that the firewood–fire metaphor originates from Buddhist canons, demonstrating his familiarity with the metaphor’s reference in the scriptures, and hence, he clearly could not agree with such a perspective.

The viewpoint of Huiyuan’s opponents is considered in Buddhism as an annihilationist view (*ucchedavādā*, *duanjian* 斷見), which believes that there is no cycle of rebirth after the end of life in this world. Indeed, Huiyuan is facing the annihilationist view advocating the theory of spirit extinction (*shenmielun* 神滅論). In the opening of XJSBM, the opponents pose a challenging question:

When one’s vital qi is exhausted in one lifetime (*jiyu yisheng* 極於一生), life ends and it dissipates, leaving no personhood, although as a wondrous thing that facilitates everything, it is the transformation of yin and yang. After transformation, it becomes life, and after another transformation, it becomes death. It gathers to begin and disperses to end. 夫稟氣極於一生，生盡則消液而同無神，雖妙物故是陰陽之化耳，既化而為生，又化而為死，既聚而為始，又散而為終。(T52. 2102. 31b 15–17)

From the phrase “exhausted in one lifetime”, it is clear that the opponents’ main argument emphasizes that there is no reincarnation after the end of one lifetime, which is considered a typical annihilationist view in Buddhism. Before Huiyuan, similar annihilationist views like those of his opponents were indeed prevalent, as pointed out by Yang Quan 楊泉 in his *Theory of Things* (*Wuli Lun* 物理論):

Humans are born by absorbing essence (Jingqi 精氣)³⁹ and die when the essence is exhausted. Death, just like extinction, is like fire. When the firewood is exhausted, the fire goes out and there is no lighter. Therefore, after the fire is extinguished, no residual fire remains; and after a person dies, no soul remains.

人含氣而生，精盡而死。死，猶澌也，滅也。譬如火焉，薪盡而火滅，則無光矣。故滅火之余，無遺炎矣；人死之後，無遺魂矣。⁴⁰

What Yang Quan advocates in the phrase, “no soul remains after a person dies”, is seen in Buddhism as emphasizing the annihilationist view that there is no cycle of rebirth after death in this life. Buddhism usually juxtaposes the annihilationist view and eternalist view (*śāśvata-drṣṭi*, *changjian* 常見) as two erroneous beliefs:

If one says: “The soul (**jīva*) is the same as the body”, that person has no divine practice. Again, if one says: “The soul is different from the body”, that person has no divine practice. Not attached to these two extremes, one treads the middle way. 若見言：“命即是身。”彼梵行者所無有。若復見言：“命異身異。”梵行者所無有。於此二邊，心所不隨，正向中道。(T02. 99. 84c20–23)

Here, *jīva* refers to the soul. The eternalist view or the theory of “self” that is that the soul is separate from the body implies that the soul is a spiritual substance that exists independently of the body. The view of the eternal soul is a kind of eternalist view. On the other hand, the annihilationist view of “non-self” or that the soul is the body posits that the soul and the body are inseparable, and when the body dies, the soul no longer has a basis for existence. The SĀ points out the following:

There is a teacher who perceives that the true self is in this world as known and spoken, yet knows nothing about what happens after life ends, this is called the first teacher coming out of the world... The first teacher who perceives the true self in this world as known and spoken is called the annihilationist view. 有一師，見現在世真實是我，如所知說，而無能知命終後事，是名第一師出於世間.....其第一師見現在世真實是我，如所知說者，名曰斷見。(T02. 99. 32a4–11)

For original Buddhism, represented by the *Āgamas*, the eternalist view refers to the real soul in the cycle of rebirth after the end of this life, while the annihilationist view refers to the cessation of rebirth after the end of a single life. Because the definition of “two views” in the *mādhyamika* school is different from that of original Buddhism, referring to “existence” and “non-existence”,⁴¹ the original Buddhist definition of the annihilationist view is often obscured, so much so that Huiyuan’s refutation of the annihilationist view has been overlooked. But Huiyuan’s statement that “the deluded see the decay of body in one life” reveals his main argument against the annihilationist view.

Therefore, Huiyuan does not use the eternalist view to refute the annihilationist view; the main theme of his XJSBM is solely to refute the annihilationist view. Refuting the annihilationist view does not necessarily mean advocating the eternalist view of a real soul separate from the body. However, Buddhist scholars, based on the strict definition of “self” in the *Mādhyamaka* school, often view his doctrine as a type of “theory of self”. Simultaneously, many researchers often interpret it as similar to the thought of the immortal soul in the context of Daoist magic arts because of the implications of the soul as a sovereign entity in the Chinese language, particularly as this kind of Daoist magical arts thinking was indeed prevalent in Huiyuan’s time.⁴² Just because these ideas coexisted with Huiyuan does not imply that he adopted them. On the contrary, Huiyuan was a steadfast opponent of these concepts. The TDS, to this point, regarding the meaning of the three designations, states:

The designation through the past is to control the annihilationist [view] of sentient beings. Designation through extinction is to control the eternalist [view]. 過去施設者，制眾生斷。滅施設者，制有常。(T25. 1506. 24b6)

The *Vātsīputrīya* school precisely believes that the purpose of designation through the past is to counteract the annihilationist view, that is, the view that rebirth completely disappears after the end of a single life. Huiyuan’s proposal of the firewood and fire metaphor is indeed also aimed at opposing this kind of annihilationist view. However, he did not propose this view with the intention of advocating the eternalist view of the immortality

of the soul. Contrarily, his attitude towards personhood is negative, something that needs to be dissolved. This is related to his discussion about transmigration.

3.3. Emotions Uncontrollable: The Similarity between Huiyuan's Shen as "Upon Transmigration Cessation, Causes, and Conditions Cease Permanently" and the Vātsīputrīya's Pudgala as "Designation through Extinction"

Although Huiyuan in XJSBM vehemently insists on the indestructibility of personhood, this emphasis is, in fact, an act of resignation. In his view, transmigration is the inevitable predicament for sentient beings burdened by emotions (*qing* 情):

Emotion is the mother of transmigration, personhood is the root of emotion, and emotion has a way of meeting the beginning. 情為化之母，神為情之根，情有會初之道。(T52. 2102. 31c12–13)

In Huiyuan's view, personhood is the source of emotion, but emotion is the direct cause of transmigration. Concerning the specific function of emotion, he points out the following:

[If one] has emotion, [one] can animate things [through] emotion; [if one] has cognition, [one] can seek to understand [through] numerals. 有情則可以物感，有識則可以數求。(T52. 2102. 31c9–10)

According to Huiyuan, the reason why a "person" is a person is because of the emotion that gathers elements such as the five aggregates, causing them to constitute a causal chain that cycles and flows endlessly. Huiyuan evaluated emotion in the fourth piece, Pursuit of the Ultimate Truth for not Transmigration 求宗不順化 (henceforth QZBSH, *Qizong Bushunhua*), of his work BJWZL:

Emotion becomes increasingly stagnated, and entanglements grow deeper. How can the trouble it causes be asserted that it is exceptional? 情彌滯而累彌深，其為患也，焉可勝言哉？(T52. 2102. 30c6–7)

Consequently, Huiyuan posits that due to the influence of various passions and desires, emotion increasingly solidifies and becomes more deeply entangled, embodying ignorance, attachment, and various other afflictions. Thus, emotion is the trouble that represents his thorough negation of emotion. It is precisely because emotion leads to reincarnation that Huiyuan pointed out the following in QZBSH:

If [we] do not allow emotion to burden life, then it is possible for life to be extinguished (*zshengkemie* 則生可滅). [If we] do not allow life to burden the personhood, then the personhood can be extinguished (*zshenkeming* 則神可冥). When *mingshen juejing* 冥神絕境, it is called entering *nirvāṇa*. 不以情累其生，則生可滅，不以生累其神，則神可冥，冥神絕境，故謂之泥洹。(T52. 2102. 30c14–16)

In this context, Huiyuan's statements "*zshengkemie* 則生可滅" and "*zshenkeming* 則神可冥" convey the state where both life and spirit (personhood) are extinguished.⁴³ Therefore, Huiyuan believes that the true *nirvāṇa* lies precisely in not allowing emotion to burden life, thus completely extinguishing the possibility of life. This is the state of "when the firewood is exhausted, the fire goes out", as described in the *Āgamas*. Only under this condition can the personhood be extinguished.

From the Daoist perspective, "*mingshen juejing* 冥神絕境" might be a natural, carefree state, a kind of transcendent state of existence. But in Huiyuan's context, he merely borrowed the term from Daoism, not the connotation. However, Buddhist scholars during the Wei-Jin period were often influenced by Chinese thought or retrospectively applied the conditions of Buddhism after its full Tathāgatagarbha transformation to the Wei-Jin era, forgetting that the essence of meaning-matching Buddhism lies in the Indian Buddhist original meaning it defends. For instance, Furuta (1979, pp. 97–140) argues that Huiyuan's *shen* promises its eternality and that its "mystery" (*ming* 冥) embodies the transcendence of spirit. M. Liu (2014, p. 29), based on Huiyuan's depiction of the *shen*, points out that the eternity of the spirit propagated by Buddhism is not merely reminding us to value the

spirit beyond the physical body. Its deeper implication lies in the fact that the emotional entanglements and physical constraints we perceive are false appearances, and the transcendent state of the spirit's mystical unification with the divine realm is the true original home belonging to humanity. This interpretation of *shen* resembles Daoism more than Buddhism.⁴⁴ Huiyuan's *mingshen juejing* should be understood as the personhood that, as an affliction (*ming*),⁴⁵ no longer takes the four elements, five aggregates, and so on as its object (*jing*), and thus does not give rise to new sentient beings, that is, personhood nevermore animating things and borrowing numerals. It corresponds to the designation through the extinction of the Vātsīputrīyas, or not receiving existence in the future in the *Āgamas*. But before this, the most crucial capability of personhood is postmortem transmigration, which his opponents deny:

Hence, Zhuangzi said: "The birth of a man is a concentration of qi. When qi is concentrated, it is life; when dispersed, it is death. What is my worry if the pains of life and death?" Those who speak well of the Dao must have acquired it. If it is indeed so, the ultimate truth culminates in one life. It makes sense that when life ends, there is no transformation. 故莊子曰：“人之生，氣之聚，聚則為生，散則為死。若死生為彼徒苦，吾又何患？”古之善言道者，必有以得之，若果然耶，至理極於一生，生盡不化義可尋也。(T52. 2102. 31b27-c1)

His opponents cite Zhuangzi's view that concentration is life and dispersion is death to argue that the ultimate truth is limited to one life, and the spirit ceases to operate after the end of life. In response, Huiyuan also cites Zhuangzi's discourse to refute this:

The debater does not seek the argument of being born and dying (*fangsheng fangsi* 方生方死) but is confused about the concentration and dispersion in one transmigration. He does not think about personhood's Dao as the spirit that stimulates things but says that the subtle and the coarse end together. Is this not sad? 論者不尋方生方死之說，而惑聚散於一化，不思神道有妙物之靈，而謂粗精同盡。不亦悲乎？(T52. 2102. 31c23–25)

From this, it can be inferred that Huiyuan might not deny Zhuangzi's statement that "concentration is life, dispersion is death", and further responds to Zhuangzi's view of life and death. In Huiyuan's view, the real point of contention is not whether the body and the personhood are accompanied, but the ability of the personhood to transfer to different bodies. Therefore, he considers the argument that the ultimate truth culminates in one life to be confused about the concentration and dispersion in one transformation; the key is that there is only one life. His emphasis on the transmission of fire from firewood does not lie in expressing that fire is independent from firewood, but repeatedly clarifying that fire cannot be separated from firewood and that firewood continually emerges so that fire has no choice but to keep burning. On this matter, Huiyuan points out the following in his QZBSH:

The Three worlds flow, with sin and suffering as their field. [If] transmigration is exhausted, then causes and conditions cease forever (*huajin ze yinyuan yongxi* 化盡則因緣永息). [If they continue to] flow, suffering is endless. How can this be clear? [If] life takes the body as shackles, life is from transmigration. Transmigration [is from] emotions stimulating, then the personhood stagnates at its origin (*ben* 本), and intellect (*zhi* 智) dims its illumination (*zhao* 照). Once it is confined, what remains is only oneself, and what is involved is only movement. Hence, the spiritual rein (*lingpei* 靈轡) is lost, the path of life opens daily, and it follows desire (*tan'ai* 貪愛) in the long stream. Can it just be experienced once? 三界流動以罪苦為場，化盡則因緣永息，流動則受苦無窮，何以明其然？夫生以形為桎梏，而生由化有，化以情感，則神滯其本，而智昏其照，介然有封，則所存唯己，所涉唯動。於是靈轡失御生塗日開，方隨貪愛於長流，豈一受而已哉。(T52. 2102. 30c4–13)

Huiyuan characterizes this endless transmission of the fire phenomenon as infinite suffering. He believes that the body is precisely the root of the fetters that bring life. Personhood is the trouble that impedes extinction. The intellect represents the spirit, manifesting cognitive functions, but the dim intellect⁴⁶ obstructs illumination, which means the truth of Buddhism. It is due to the combined action of body and personhood that life continues to circulate in the sea of suffering of reincarnation.

Indeed, Huiyuan's discussions are filled with descriptions of various sufferings in samsara, and many previous studies have viewed these as expressions of a plea for liberation, such as Lee (2021, pp. 79–115), who interprets Huiyuan's discussions within the framework of the four noble truths. However, the key lies in understanding the role of the *shen* in this context—whether it is ultimately annihilated or if the practice merely purifies it. Lee (2021, p. 96) interprets the state of the soul's original pure existence as envisioned by Huiyuan as our true liberation, describing this liberated state of the spirit as an original pure existence. Indeed, a notable distinction in Huiyuan's use of the "fire and firewood" analogy, compared to the *Āgamas* and the Vātsīputrīya school, is that his discourse does not discuss the extinguishing of fire; perhaps for this reason, Lee translates the other three truths using common expressions—The Suffering, The Cause, The Path—yet uniquely describes the truth of cessation as "Liberation" instead of "Cessation". As Lee subsequently notes, Huiyuan describes this process as "attaining the fundamental ideal by returning to the origin" and its result as *nirvāṇa*, which in Sanskrit indeed means the extinguishing of fire. On the other hand, if Huiyuan truly believed the *shen* to be something pure, why then does the above quotation use the phrase "the personhood stagnates at its origin" (*shen zhi qi ben* 神滯其本)? This might only be conceivable if he similarly held a negating attitude towards the personhood.

Therefore, Huiyuan's assertion of the indestructibility of personhood does not emphasize personhood as having an absolute reality like the real self in Hinduism; it must inevitably not be separated from the five aggregates. The phrase indestructibility of personhood is only used because afflictions, like firewood, constantly emerge, and it is impossible to extinguish them without experiencing strenuous Buddhist learning activities. Hence, he says, "Can it just be experienced once?" Only after transmigration is exhausted and causes and conditions cease forever, can final liberation be achieved, which is the designation through the extinction of the Vātsīputrīyas. Only then will the great fire called *shen* truly cease.

In Zhuangzi's philosophy, the term "as births, so deaths, as deaths, so births" (*fangsheng fangsi* 方生方死) refers to a transcendent, carefree poetic state where life and death are perceived as one.⁴⁷ However, Huiyuan's term "being born and dying" refers to the unceasing cycle of life and death, driven by immeasurable suffering. Therefore, the personhood that does not extinguish is not a metaphysical revelation of human nature by Huiyuan, but rather an explanation for the endless vexation from Huiyuan's perspective. Who would not wish for the personhood to be extinguished?

4. Conclusions

This article investigates the Indian origins of Huiyuan's firewood and fire metaphor, asserting that both the *Āgamas* and the Abhidharma made extensive use of the firewood and fire metaphor before Huiyuan. The *Āgamas* use the phrase "firewood is exhausted, fire is extinguished" as a metaphor for *nirvāṇa*, while the Vātsīputrīyas use the firewood and fire metaphor to analogize the *pudgala* subjected to multiple designations. From this, it is concluded that Huiyuan rejected the doctrine of a substantial "self".

Further delving into Huiyuan's discourse, we find that Huiyuan never claimed the existence of a real "self" separated from the aggregates. The main purpose of the XJSBM argument is to respond to the opponent's assertion that life is exhausted with the dissipation of *qi* in one life, and with the exhaustion of life, the spirit also perishes, and to use this to refute the nihilistic view that there is nothing after the demise of one life. Huiyuan's true doctrine, as revealed by the title of Pursuit of the Ultimate Truth for not Transmigration,

is to take *nirvāṇa*, characterized by the period after the transmigration extinguishes causes and conditions, which cease permanently, as the doctrine, and to resist the conformity to the cycle of rebirth. Huiyuan's argument has never deviated from the original Buddhist opposition to annihilationism and has also never accepted the frequent occurrence of a "self" separate from the aggregates, fully adhering to the spirit of "no-self" that has been followed since the original Buddhism.

However, Huiyuan's readers, who often measure Huiyuan by the standard of the Mādhyamaka school and the *prajñā* thought, are ignorant of the original Buddhist discourse and misunderstand the Vātsīputrīyas' notion of *pudgala*, being confined to the Wei-Jin "meaning-matching" Buddhist concept.⁴⁸ They cannot penetrate these concepts to examine their Buddhist essence and consequently view Huiyuan as a representative of the belief in the immortality of the soul, akin to Daoist magic arts. But this author believes that Huiyuan's description of the "personhood" in BJWZL fully corresponds to the Vātsīputrīyas' three designations of the "indefinable aggregate" (as shown in the Table 1 below), and is a paradigm of Chinese Buddhists accurately grasping Indian Buddhist doctrine.

Table 1. Comparison between the *pudgala* of the Vātsīputrīyas and Huiyuan's Concept of *shen*.

Function	Vātsīputrīya School's <i>Pudgala</i>	Lushan Huiyuan's <i>Shen</i>
Unify the Five Skandhas	Designation through Sensation 受施設	Animating Things and Moves, Operating under Borrowing Numerals 感物而動, 假數而行
The "Consistency" of Rebirth in Lifetimes	Designation of the Past 過去施設	Function of Postmortem Transmigration 冥移之功
The Object of <i>Nirvāṇa</i>	Designation through Extinction 滅施設	Upon Transmigration Cessation, Causes and Conditions Cease Permanently 化盡則因緣永息

Huiyuan's "matching meaning" strategy was more radical compared to Sengzhao, who widely quoted various Sūtras. Although we can deduct from his stance that the "firewood-fire metaphor originates from the holy canons" that he should have been aware of the rich firewood and fire metaphors in the original Buddhist scriptures and the Abhidharma literature of the various Buddhist schools, he completely obscured the Indian origin of the firewood and fire metaphor and widely cited the Zhuangzi as the basis for his argumentation. Apart from being a response to his opponent's preemptive citation of the Zhuangzi, I suspect this was largely due to Huiyuan's confidence in his Buddhist scholarship and his mastery of Wei-Jin Neo-Daoism concepts. However, as later Buddhists gradually abandoned "matching meaning" and the views of the Vātsīputrīyas were increasingly criticized by Mahāyāna Buddhism as the heretical belief in a "real self", Huiyuan's insights were obscured in the dust of history. His scattered references to the *shen* were unfairly derided as identical to the concept of an eternal soul found in Daoist magical arts.

Finally, I believe this paper's contribution lies in adhering to certain universally unchallenged principles, such as prioritizing the internal perspectives of Buddhism over external viewpoints and paying closer attention to texts associated with figures closely linked to Huiyuan. These aspects have been variously overlooked in previous research. Additionally, I acknowledge that within Buddhism, there are undoubtedly interpretations that regard *shen* as an immortal soul that must be purified to achieve liberation. It is also undeniable that Huiyuan was influenced by the MPU or the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*. However, if we avoid projecting later interpretations of Buddhism onto his era, this should form the basis of a secondary investigation. Since the 20th century, Buddhist studies have increasingly focused on the *Āgamas* and Abhidharma, yet when engaging with Chinese Buddhist philosophy or doctrine, these texts and this research seems forgotten. Despite the well-known close interaction between Huiyuan and Samghadeva involving translations of Abhidharma texts and his preface to the TDS, it seems that East Asian Buddhism is not an

isolated phenomenon. By updating our understanding of Indian Buddhism, we may gain a deeper insight into East Asia.

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Notes

- ¹ According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Chadha (2022) points out that the Sanskrit term *ātman*, accurately translated as “self”, represents the essence of individual humans (*manuṣya*) or the psychophysical complex (*pudgala*), which encompasses the mind, body, and sense organs. There exists a philosophical contention regarding whether this essence constitutes a substantial soul or pure consciousness, and whether such an essence exists at all. Buddhist no-self theorists refute the existence of any such essence, asserting that the psychophysical complex is entirely constitutive of what there is.
- ² Prior research has often translated Huiyuan’s term *shen* as “spirit” (Fung 2018) or “soul” (Liebenthal and Hui-yüan 1950). However, considering the subsequent explanations in the text, this paper argues that the role played by Huiyuan’s *shen* aligns more closely with “personhood”, corresponding to the three designations attributed to the *pudgala* by the Vātsīputrīya School. In this context, “*ling* 靈” might be more suitably translated as “spirit”. Translating it as “soul” might presume that Huiyuan was unduly influenced by the substantive theories of the soul in early Daoism. If within a single sentient being, Huiyuan’s *shen* could be understood as a spirit, but because Huiyuan’s discussion involves multiple sentient beings within the cycle of reincarnation, which are essentially different spirits but can be assumed to have similar personhood, a more suitable concept should indeed be “personhood”.
- ³ The term referred to here as “three kinds of designations” pertains to the Vātsīputrīya school’s three reasons for explicating the concept of *pudgala* (person). These reasons are as follows: designation through sensation, designation through the past, and designation through extinction. Thus, a more appropriate title would be “Three Reasons for Designating the Pudgala”. However, since the Vātsīputrīya school refers to these three reasons as distinct “designations”, this text adheres to the Vātsīputrīya convention by referring to them as “three kinds of designations”.
- ⁴ According to the research of Kimura (1960, p. 395), the term “holy scripture” (*shengdian* 聖典) here refers to the Buddhist scriptures.
- ⁵ Later Buddhists often referred to the Vātsīputrīya school as “*antaścaratīrthika*”, a typical representation of viewing other sects as heresy. See *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā*: The Pudgalavādins (that is Vātsīputrīyas), however, are referred to as the internal non-Buddhists (*antaścaratīrthikāh*). They seek a self, termed *pudgala*, which is indefinable and different from the skandhas, the fundamental elements. Otherwise, it would seem like they adhere to the doctrines of the non-Buddhists (*tīrthikas*). (*pudgalavādināḥ tu punar antaścaratīrthikāh/skandhebhyaḥ tattoānyatoābhyām avācyam pudgalanāmānam ātmānam icchanti/anyathā tīrthikasiddhāntābhīniveśadarśanam syāt*). (Poussin 1901, p. 455:16-18). Also, see the Chengguan’s 澄觀 *Commentary on Mahāvaiṣṭya Buddhāvataṃsaka Sūtra* (*Da Fangguangfo Huayanjing Shu* 大方廣佛華嚴經疏): There are two kinds of non-Buddhist: one is totally external, outside the realm of Buddhism. The other is internal non-Buddhists.....The internal non-Buddhist, originating from the Vātsīputrīya and Vaipulya, who claim to understand Buddhist scriptures by their intelligence, generating their “reality (*yi*—)” views, and appending to Buddhism, hence the name. Vātsīputrīya, reading Śāriputrābhīdharma, devised their interpretation, claiming “self” beyond the four alternatives (**catuṣkoṭi*, *siju* 四句), in the fifth, indescribable repository. The Buddha said these people are no different from non-Buddhist. All treatises generally reject them, hence the name non-Buddhist... 外道有二：一外外道，即佛法外。二內外道.....佛法外道，起自犢子、方廣，自以聰明讀佛經書而生一見，附佛法起，故得此名。犢子讀《舍利弗毗曇》，自別制義，言我在四句外，第五不可說藏中。佛說此人不異外道。諸論皆推不受，名外道也.....(T35. 1735. 713a2–8).
- ⁶ Chen (2008, p. 37) referred to the Vātsīputrīya school as non-Buddhist, and X. Li’s (2003, p. 106) statement suggests that Huiyuan might have drawn some lines of thought from the treatise of the Vātsīputrīya school, **Tridharmikaśāstra* (henceforth the TDS, *San-*

fadu Lun 三法度論), which was attacked by other Buddhist schools as adhering to non-Buddhist dharma, for his understanding of the immortality of the spirit.

- 7 Huiyuan's writing style is characterized by his reluctance to directly quote Buddhist scriptures. Consequently, it is indeed challenging to ascertain the influence of specific texts on him through direct citations. Previous studies have shown a preference for sourcing from what are now considered mainstream Buddhist scriptures of the time, thus emphasizing texts like the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* or the MPU. However, I believe this approach may project our contemporary understanding of Buddhism onto Huiyuan. Historically, Huiyuan had significant interactions with Samghadeva, a monk who translated Abhidharma texts. A notable instance is the TDŚ, for which he specifically requested Samghadeva to undertake the translation. *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* (henceforth GSZ, *Gaoseng Zhuan* 高僧傳): Later, there came a monk from *Kāśpīra (Jibin 罽賓) named Samghadeva, who was well-versed in various canons. He arrived in Xunyang in the 16th year of the Taiyuan 太元 era of the Jin Dynasty. Huiyuan requested him to retranslate the **Abhidharmahrdaya* (henceforth AH, *Apitan Xin Lun* 阿毘曇心論) and the TDŚ. As a result, the two schools (of thought) flourished, and Huiyuan composed prefaces to clarify their doctrines, providing guidance for learners. 後有罽賓沙門僧伽提婆, 博識眾典, 以晉太元十六年, 來至潯陽。遠請重譯《阿毘曇心》及《三法度論》, 於是二學乃興, 並制序標宗, 貽於學者。(T50. 2059. 359b20–23) In his preface to the TDŚ, Huiyuan offers high praise for this work, stating the following: The TDŚ indeed originates from the four *Āgamas*. The four *Āgamas* are the sūtras within the Tripiṭaka and the deep repositories among the twelve divisions of the Buddhist canon. They are unified by the three dharmas, with the dharma of awakening as the path. 《三法度經》者, 蓋出四阿含, 四阿含則三藏之契經, 十二部之淵府也。以三法為統。以覺法為道。(T55, no. 2145, p. 73a3–5).
- 8 According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Chan (2019) notes that the term “Neo-Daoism” (or “Neo-Taoism”) aims to encapsulate the central philosophical developments in early medieval China, spanning from the third to the sixth century C.E. Chinese sources predominantly refer to this period as *Xuanxue*, or “Learning (*xue*) in the Profound (*xuan*)”. The term *Xuanxue* became widespread during the fifth century C.E. and described an academic discipline within the imperial academy's curriculum. In this formal academic context, *Xuanxue*'s subject matter primarily revolved around the *Yijing* 易經, the *Laozi* 老子, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, and selected commentaries on these works. These classical texts were regarded as possessing profound insights into the cosmos and the human condition, collectively known as the “Three (Great Works on the) Profound” (*sanxuan*). Their collective teachings, through the concept of *Dao*, envisioned a state of “grand harmony” and “great peace”, necessitating exploration and explanation. Thus, the objective of *Xuanxue* was to elucidate the nature and function of the *Dao*, which might otherwise remain obscure or elusive. The relationship between body and spirit is one of the fundamental topics of Wei-Jin Neo-Daoism, and many researchers have studied it. However, many previous studies, such as L. Liu's (2013, pp. 134–35), have interpreted Huiyuan's *shen* as the soul.
- 9 Gombrich (2006, pp. 65–69) provides an in-depth discussion of the metaphor of fire in the *Nikāyas* and its relation to *nirvāṇa*, identifying greed, hatred, and delusion as three types of fires, and positing that *nirvāṇa* represents the cessation of these fires.
- 10 This refers to the origins of Chinese intellectual history. As I will elaborate later, when Huiyuan discussed the metaphor of the firewood and fire, he employed materials from *Zhuangzi*. Fung (2018) has systematically reviewed the materials related to the firewood–fire metaphor in Chinese intellectual history post-Han dynasty, including those used by Huiyuan.
- 11 According to historical records, Huiyuan indeed often employed this strategy to interpret Buddhist doctrines. As seen in GSZ: Once, a visitor attended a lecture and found it difficult to understand the doctrine of reality. His doubts only increased over time. Huiyuan then drew upon the meanings from *Zhuangzi* to draw analogy, which then enlightened the confused visitor. 嘗有客聽講, 難實相義, 往復移時, 彌增疑昧, 遠乃引《莊子》義為連類, 於是惑者曉然。(T50. 2059. 358a11–13) In this context, I perceive a nuanced interplay of visibility in the materials presented, where Huiyuan tends to reference non-Buddhist materials from a “visible” or “illuminated” perspective, while the “shadowed” aspects pertain to his interpretations grounded in Buddhist internal doctrines. Consequently, I describe Huiyuan's metaphor of the fire and firewood as “Metaphors in the Shadow of Indian Canons”.
- 12 The evidence Kimura presents originates from MMK: The five aggregates are constantly in continuity, just like the flame of a lamp (*dīpa*); thus, in this world, it is inappropriate to assert them as either finite or infinite. 五陰常相續, 猶如燈火炎; 以是故世間, 不應邊無邊。(T30. 1564. 38c28–29). The corresponding Sanskrit: *skandhānām eṣa samtāno yasmād dīpārciṣām iva, tasmān nānantavattvaṃ ca nāntavattvaṃ ca yujyate.* (MMK 27:22). In addition, there is the MPU: Currently, for those who have not yet attained the true path, their minds are clouded by various afflictions, which create the causes and conditions for rebirth. At the moment of death, these five aggregates give rise to five new aggregates in continuity. This can be compared to one lamp (**dīpa*) igniting another. 今未得實道, 是人諸煩惱覆心, 作生因緣業, 死時從此五陰相續生五陰。譬如一燈, 更然一燈。(T25. 1509. 149c23–25). In my opinion, it is likely that Huiyuan had access to the MMK and MPU. Indeed, there are many similarities between the metaphors of lamp and firewood and fire that could serve as ancillary evidence. However, Kimura seems to have neglected the more direct evidence in Buddhist scriptures translated with the participation of Dao'an 道安 and the Lushan monastic community, such as the MĀ, VŚ, and TDŚ, and instead referenced texts translated by correspondents.
- 13 In my opinion, even though Lo has comprehensively cataloged numerous instances of the firewood metaphor that existed prior to, and concurrent with, Huiyuan, and that may well have been read by Huiyuan, this does not necessarily prove that there was definite intersection between these instances and Huiyuan. Instances like passages from the Shorter Chinese *Samyukta Āgama* (*Bieyi za ahan jing* 別譯雜阿含經, T100) with an unclear translator and time frame, or metaphors unrelated to the main theme, like

the metaphor concerning “warmth” (*nuan* 暖) in the AH translated by Samghadeva, should not be used as evidence. However, evidence from the MĀ translated by Samghadeva, which provides strong proof, was unfortunately excluded by Lo. Lo excluded it because the text does not explicitly refer to the body. Despite the lack of explicit reference to the body here, I still believe it can serve as evidence. The “firewood” here carries the same metaphorical significance as the lotus in the previous context, both symbolizing the Buddha’s body, according to the research of Lamotte (1981).

- 14 In addition, the Chapter on Extinguishing of the Fire (*huomie pin* 火滅品), the sixteenth section of the *Ekottarika Āgama* (*zengyi ahanjing* 增壹阿含經) translated by Samghadeva, features a passage concerning the Buddha’s extinguishment. As seen in the *Ekottarika Āgama*: The *Tathāgata’s appearance in the world is extremely rare, occurring only once in many eons, truly imperceptible. It is also difficult to come across this place, where all actions cease completely. With no remaining desire and no defilements, it fully extinguishes into **Parinirvāṇa*. 如來出世甚為難遇，億劫乃出，實不可見，此處亦難遇，一切諸行悉休息止，愛盡無余，亦無染污，滅盡泥洹。(T02. 125. 578a18–20). Furthermore, the Sanskrit term *nirvāṇa*, commonly used to mean “extinguishing of fire” in everyday language, is extended in religious doctrine to signify “the complete cessation of body and mind for the liberated”. Cf. Monier-Williams (1899, p. 577).
- 15 The GSZ states the following: Samghadeva was particularly adept in the *Abhidharma-hrdaya*, thoroughly grasping its intricate essence. He frequently recited the **Tridharmikaśāstra*... Master Lushan Huiyuan was known for his earnest devotion to exquisite scriptures, extensively compiling collections of sacred texts. With a humble and open mind, he eagerly anticipated distant visitors. Upon hearing of amghadeva’s arrival, he immediately extended an invitation to join him at Mount Lu. 僧伽提婆……尤善《阿毘曇心》，洞其纖旨。常誦《三法度論》……先是，廬山慧遠法師。翹勤妙典，廣集經藏，虛心側席，延望遠賓，聞其至止，即請入廬岳。(T50. 2059. 328c22–329a13).
- 16 Original Buddhism, also referred to as pre-sectarian Buddhism, Early Buddhism, or Primitive Buddhism, denotes the form of Buddhism before the emergence of various sectarian divisions. The canonical collections from this period are primarily represented by the *sūtras* and *vinayas*. The extant texts of the *sūtras* include the *Āgamas*, which are Chinese translations prevalent in Northern Buddhism, and the *Nikāyas*, which are in Pāli and form part of Southern Buddhism. As Lamotte (1988, p. 156) observes, the *Āgamas* and the *Nikāyas* share significant foundational similarities, yet they differ in their modes of expression and sequence.
- 17 In this context, *nirvāṇa* refers to the final death of a liberated person after their last lifetime. For original Buddhism, the final life of the Buddha or arhat consists of two phases. The first phase is the practice and realization of liberation. At this point, they have eliminated all afflictions, but retain the body of the final life until death, referred to as the “earthly body”. This phase is termed *nirvāṇa* with the remainder (*sopadhīśesa nirvāṇa*, *youyu niepan* 有餘涅槃). After the death in this life, there is no longer any cycle of rebirth; no new body emerges, and there is no object for consciousness to cling to. This is referred to as *nirvāṇa* without the remainder (*anupadhīśesa nirvāṇa*, *wuyu niepan* 無餘涅槃). Harvey (2004, p. 181) describes the later state as “experiences have become cool”. According to early Buddhism, we can only describe that the present five aggregates, including experience or consciousness, will cease after the last lifetime of an arhat; however, we cannot speak of the state post-cessation because it utterly transcends our cognition and belongs to the category of questions to which the Buddha did not respond. Anything beyond the subjective–objective experiential domain of the *āyatana*s would be mere empty words (*vācāvathukam*) (cf. Lin 2022, pp. 145–55).
- 18 While it is conceivable that from the standpoint of original Buddhism, the state “after” *nirvāṇa* represents a kind of ontological nihilism, for original Buddhism, this transcends the scope of cognition and hence holds no value for discussion. Thus, when questions arise in the *sūtras* about the Buddha’s existence after death, the Buddha does not respond (cf. Lin 2022, pp. 152–55).
- 19 Based on a rough estimation by the author, terms like “*bushou houyou* 不受後有” often found in the SĀ, occur over 220 times in the *Āgama* section of the *Taishō Tripitaka* 大正新脩大藏經. Similarly, the term “*bugeng shouyou* 不更受有”, frequently used in the MĀ, appears over 110 times in the *Āgama* section of the *Taishō Tripitaka*.
- 20 Due to the limited transmission and translation of the Vātsīputrīya school’s own texts, there is no direct evidence that explicates their view of the Buddha’s body. However, traditions within the *Sthavira Nikāya*, including the Sarvāstivāda and Theravāda, tend to interpret the Buddha’s body based on the literal meanings of the *Āgamas*, not considering the Buddha’s earthly sufferings mere performance. Given that the Vātsīputrīya school is part of the *Sthavira Nikāya*, and considering that the Sarvāstivāda sees the doctrines of the Vātsīputrīya as closely related to its own, any significant differences in the conception of the Buddha’s body would likely have been noted by them. However, since the Sarvāstivāda does not highlight such differences, this paper assumes a similarity in views. Therefore, this discussion on the Vātsīputrīya’s conception of the Buddha’s body relies on the descriptions from the Sarvāstivāda.
- 21 In addition to the literal interpretation of the *Āgamas* and the sect of the elders (*Sthavira Nikāya*), another perspective on the Buddha may originate from the Mahāsāṃghika school. This school characterizes the Buddha as transcendent (*lokottaravāda*) with all aspects of him considered undefiled, including his physical birth. His birth is described as apparitional (*upapāduka*), and his life experiences are portrayed akin to a narrative. His body is deemed illusory, and he exhibits the characteristics and gestures of humanity, which are foreign to him, only to conform to worldly conventions (*lokānuvartana*). Refer to the preface of the Mahāvastu for more details. (Lamotte 1981, pp. 39–40).
- 22 This narrative is ubiquitous in Buddhist canons. According to Lamotte (1981, p. 43), it appears in texts such as the MPU, the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinayapitaka*, and the *Sūtra on the Cause of Creation Spoken by the Buddha* (*Foshuo Xingqixing Jing* 佛說興起行經, T197).

- 23 Based on the available literature, it appears that the Vātsīputrīya school might not itself refer to the *puḍgala* as an “indefinable self”; this terminology may originate from misrepresentation by critics from other sects. Instead, the school may employ terms such as “indefinable aggregate” or “indefinable dharma (*bukeshuo fa* 不可說法)”.
- 24 The expression here is similar to the Jataka tales, commonly used by the Buddha to denote his previous lives. Due to the limitations of my Sanskrit (or other Indian languages) and Buddhist literature proficiency, I am currently unable to reconstruct a verifiable term for a particular past life of the Buddha.
- 25 The history of the Vātsīputrīya school is further split into four sub-sects. Cf. *Samayabhedoparacanacakra* (henceforth SBC, *Yibu Zonglun Lun* 異部宗輪論): Due to differences in interpretation of a certain verse, four sects emerged from this school (Vātsīputrīya school). These were the *Dharmottariya, *Bhadrayāniya, *Sammatiya, and *Saṅṅarika. 從此部中流出四部: 謂法上部、賢胄部、正量部、密林山部。(T49. 2031. 16c22–24).
- 26 The SNŚ states the following: This is called the [person] designated through dependence, as illustrated by the metaphor of fire. 是名依說[人], 如火譬。(T32. 1649. 466b6).
- 27 Similar viewpoints are held by both Jizang 吉藏 and Yinshun 印順. Please see the *Zhongguan Lunshu* 中觀論疏 (*Commentary on the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*) where it is clearly written: “This chapter aims to refute the Vātsīputrīyas. 今此一品, 正破犢子。” (T42. 1824. 94, b23–26); see also Yin (2000, p. 195).
- 28 In this context, the perspectives of the Vātsīputrīya school are recounted through AKBh and MMK because the original texts of the Vātsīputrīya have been severely scattered and lost. Although the recounting by opposing schools inevitably carries distortions of the Vātsīputrīya’s views, it is necessary here to utilize the critiques of opponents to reconstruct the Vātsīputrīya’s positions as accurately as possible. Moreover, the discussions among various schools are fundamentally aimed at interpreting the sūtras, and this study focuses on examining whether the Vātsīputrīya provides a reasonable interpretation of the sūtras, rather than delving into the doctrinal divergences between the schools.
- 29 Indeed, scholars such as Yao (2021, p. 20) assert that Nāgārjuna’s concept of “dependent designation” derives from the Vātsīputrīya school.
- 30 Establishing Asura as the sixth realm’s *puḍgala*, its entity is substantial. 立阿素洛為第六趣補特伽羅, 體是實有。(T27. 1545. 8b24–25).
- 31 Regarding the underlying logical differences between the Vātsīputrīya and the Vaibhāṣika schools concerning “dharma”, this is a substantial issue that cannot be adequately expounded in a single section of this text. A detailed argumentation will be reserved for my subsequent papers.
- 32 The SBC states the following: The Vātsīputrīya school’s doctrine synonymously accords... provisionally designated names based on aggregates, spheres, and elements. 犢子部本宗同義.....依蘊處界假施設名。(T49. 2031. 16c14–15).
- 33 The TDŚ states the following: Only the three continuums are compiled, and the three dharmas are imagined. 唯三相續撰, 三法者是假想。(T25. 1506. 15c16).
- 34 The similarities between the Vātsīputrīya school and the Sarvāstivāda school can be seen in the *Mahāvibhāṣā śāstra* (*Da piposha lun* 大毘婆沙論): ...this doctrinal system (Sarvāstivāda) and the Vātsīputrīya school..... though mostly similar, have minor differences.....此論宗 (有部) 與犢子部.....雖多分同而有少異.....(T27. 1545. 8b17–27).
- 35 The underlying logical differences in the concept of dharma between the Vātsīputrīya school and the Sarvāstivāda school represent a significant issue that cannot be adequately addressed within a single section. A detailed argumentation on this topic will be reserved for a subsequent paper.
- 36 According to Zhang (2019, pp. 12–13), there is no shortage of works from the same period that uses the term “things” (*wu* 物) to refer to “person” (*ren* 人) or that contain reflections on the person. Zhang lists 10 examples from Guo Xiang’s 郭象 *Commentary on Zhuangzi* (*Zhuangzi Zhu* 莊子注), such as the following: When one is generous enough to accept all things, all things (*wu* 物) must return to him. 夫寬以容物, 物必歸焉。(Guo 1961, p. 162). All thing (*wu* 物) is enslaved to its own desires, by their physical body. 凡物各以所好役其形骸。(Guo 1961, p. 60). Furthermore, there are similar usages in non-philosophical texts such as *A New Account of the Tales of the World* (*Shishuo Xinyu* 世說新語) where the following is written: Ji 嵇, Ruan 阮, Shan 山, Liu 劉 were drinking merrily in the bamboo grove. Wang Rong 王戎 came late. An attendant said, “The mundane thing (*suwu* 俗物) has come again to spoil our mood!” 嵇、阮、山、劉在竹林酣飲, 王戎後往。步兵曰: “俗物已復來敗人意!” (Yu 2007, p. 917).
- 37 The author proposes two possible interpretations for “*ming* 冥” in this context. The first is “dark and obscure”, emphasizing the mystery of the reincarnation process. The second is “after death”, indicating that reincarnation occurs after death. From a rhetorical perspective, the first interpretation makes more sense. However, if we consider it from the perspective of Buddhist doctrine, the author leans more toward the second interpretation.
- 38 Buddhism does not endorse the idea that a real soul is transferred from one body to the next in the cycle of rebirth; lives in two different existences are considered completely independent individuals. However, there is a general acceptance of the transference of consciousness, karma, and some memories, though different schools hold significant divergences on this matter. The Vātsīputrīya school’s perspective on reincarnation may be akin to the intermediate existence (*antarābhava*) as understood by the Sarvāstivādins, as the intermediate existence is outlined in the SNŚ (Cf. T32. 1649. 470b16–c18). The “designation through

the past” of *puḍgala* might serve as a designated “consistency” bridging lives in two lifetimes due to the continuity of karma and memory within the process of reincarnation.

39 In the original sentence here, *jing* 精 and *qi* 氣 are not used in conjunction. They should be interpreted intertextually, advocating for their conjoined use, with the meaning being *Jingqi* 精氣.

40 Yang Quan’s *Theory of Things* has escaped, and this quotation can be found in Wang’s (1990, p. 877) note.

41 The assertion “it exists” refers to eternalism, whereas the view “it does not exist” pertains to annihilationism. *astīti śāśvatagrāho nāstīty ucchedadarśanam*. (MMK 15.10) 定有則著常，定無則著斷。(T30. 1564. 20b17).

42 As Ge (1985, p. 110) 葛洪 asserts: The physical body is the dwelling of the spirit. Therefore, it is likened to a dike—if the dike is destroyed, the water will not stay. It is compared to a candle—when the candle is worn out, the flame will not remain. If the body is overworked, the spirit disperses; when energy is exhausted, life ends. If the roots are exhausted while the branches flourish, then the green vitality will leave the tree. When the energy is weak and desires prevail, then the spirit will depart from the body. 形者，神之宅也。故譬之於堤，堤壞則水不留矣。方之於燭，燭糜則火不居矣。身勞則神散，氣竭則命終。根竭枝繁，則青青去木矣。氣疲欲勝，則精靈離身矣。

43 Here, the character “*ming* 冥” serves as a verb with the meaning of “extinguishing”. Earlier in the text, Huiyuan used this meaning when stating his opponent’s annihilation view: The body, once born, vanishes completely. Having vanished entirely (*mingjin* 冥盡), it’s not only without anything to uphold. 出生之表則廓然冥盡，既冥盡矣，非但無所立。(T52. 2102. 28a24–27) Moreover, it may also mean “yoke”, that is fully merging with *nirvāṇa*, a usage similar to the term “*parinirvāṇa*”, which means entering (*pari-*) *nirvāṇa* completely.

44 Ji (2024) notes that the philosophies of nourishing life (*yang sheng* 養生) and carefree wandering (*xiao yao* 逍遙) are two derivations of Zhuangzi’s theory of body and spirit (*shen* 神), addressing different aspects of life. The philosophy of nourishing life is the starting point, targeting the holistic existence encompassing both body and spirit. The subject of carefree wandering is the spirit, not the body, and its realm is the spiritual world, not the mundane world. The state of carefree wandering is one of “being unburdened” (*wu dai* 無待) where the spirit transcends the constraints of the physical body without dependencies or attachments, aligning with the primal Dao and manifesting a state of freedom and ease.

45 The character “*ming* 冥” carries meanings such as “ignorance”, “darkness”, “obscurity”, “after death”, “secret union”, etc. Therefore, if one presupposes that Huiyuan’s ultimate philosophical goal is the immortality of the soul, it is highly possible to misinterpret “*mingshenjuejing* 冥神絕境” as aligning with some mysterious state. However, in Buddhist literature, the use of “*ming* 冥” in the sense of “ignorance” or “darkness” often conveys the idea of delusions or afflictions, such as in the *Dirgha Āgama* (*Chang’ahan Jing* 長阿含經): There are sentient beings who are ignorance afflictions, without wisdom, not recognizing good and evil, unable to truly know suffering, accumulation, cessation, and the path. 又有眾生愚冥無智，不識善惡，不能如實知苦、習、盡、道。(T01. 1. 36b10–11). *Kalpanāmaṇḍītikā* (*Da Zhuangyan Lun Jing* 大莊嚴論經) states the following: I am confused by the desire, am blind and in darkness, seeing nothing. 我為欲迷惑，盲冥無所見，我於真濟所，造作諸過惡。(T04. 201. 327a29). The *Sūtra of the Expedient Practices of Meditation* (*Xiuxing Fangbian Chanjing* 修行方便禪經) translated by Huiyuan’s group Buddhahadra states the following: With the achievement of the [four-]elements definition meditation, the long-lasting ignorance afflictions [will be] extinguished, which can purify the mind, leaving it untainted like empty space. 界方便成就，久遠痴冥滅，能令意清淨，無垢如虛空。(T15. 618. 319c1–2).

46 Huiyuan points out intellect: The intellect has brightness and darkness; hence its illumination varies. 智有明暗，故其照不同。(T52. 2102. 31c11). This is akin to the mental factors of intellect (*prajñā caitasika*, somewhat analogous to the rational cognitive function) of the Sarvāstivāda school, representing the basic cognitive function of sentient beings’ minds. Cf. *Abhidharmavibhāṣā Śāstra* (*Apitan Piposha Lun* 阿毘曇毘婆沙論): Just like in a dark room, although there are various objects, without the illumination of a lamp, the eye cannot see them. Even if a person possesses intellect, if they do not hear the teachings from others, that person will never be able to distinguish the meanings of good and evil. 譬如暗室中，雖有種種物，若無燈明照，有目不能見。若人雖有智，不從他聞法，是人終不能，分別善惡義。(T28, no. 1546, p. 2b14–17). In the context of original Buddhism and the Sarvāstivāda School, consciousness activity is considered a defilement, hence it can be referred to as “dim intellect”. Even when the Buddha and Arhats achieve liberation, their consciousness activity remains a defilement, although no new defilements arise. The Sarvāstivāda School refers to this state as “outflow-free” (*anāsrava*). Therefore, the *Āgamas* use the metaphor of a fire being extinguished to symbolize the Buddha’s final passing, emblematic of the complete consumption of the last remainder (firewood).

47 The term “*fang* 方” has two implications. First, it signifies being in a particular state. The full sentence suggests different understandings of life and death based on their different states. Secondly, it denotes the sequential occurrence of two events (Wang and Chen 2013, p. 66). John Williams (2017, p. 11–12) translates “*fangsheng fangsi* 方生方死” as “as births, so deaths; as deaths, so births”, and points out that this implies the sagely person is open to a plurality of distinctions.

48 In my view, Huiyuan’s “meaning matching” functions much like a translation. Just as in contemporary English Buddhist studies, the term “meditation” is used to translate “*dhyāna*”, this is clearly unrelated to the influence of Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*. While the appropriateness of certain translations can be debated, it does not impede the progress of Buddhist scholarship.

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