

Towards a Buddhist Metaphysics of Gender

by

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Dedication

सुखकष्टेन दर्शनं पेठिम किंतु तत्समयः शीघ्रम्समाप्तः ।
प्रतिदिनमभाष्ये नमो नमः श्वो ऽश्रुभिर्भाषिष्ये पुनर्मिलामः।।

We studied philosophy with difficulty and joy, but that time quickly came to an end.

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|------|
| Dedication | ii |
| Acknowledgements | iii |
| List of Abbreviations | viii |
| Abstract | ix |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter 1 Self and <i>Indriya</i> in the Pāli Suttas | 24 |
| 1.1 What is ‘ <i>indriya</i> ’? What are ‘woman’ and ‘man’? | 24 |
| 1.2 <i>Indriyas</i> over ‘woman’ and ‘man’ | 28 |
| 1.3 Viewing reality through self | 42 |
| 1.4 Escaping the gendered self | 54 |
| Chapter 2 Irrational <i>Manasi-kāras</i> and Gender in the <i>Samyoga Sutta</i> | 57 |
| 2.1 The central role of the <i>indriyas</i> | 57 |
| 2.2 The meaning of <i>manasi-kāra</i> | 63 |
| 2.3 <i>Yoniso</i> and <i>ayoniso</i> | 73 |
| 2.4 Irrational <i>manasi-kāras</i> and viewing through gendered self | 82 |
| 2.5 A possible loose end | 93 |
| Chapter 3 Two Abhidharma Accounts of the Metaphysics of Gender | 95 |
| 3.1 Vasubandhu and the Vaibhāṣikas | 95 |
| 3.2 Metaphysical eliminativism: from <i>dhamma</i> to <i>dharma</i> | 100 |
| 3.3 The metaphysical status of aggregates and <i>indriyas</i> | 110 |
| 3.4 Vaibhāṣikas and the materiality of gender | 121 |
| 3.5 Vasubandhu and the <i>indriyas</i> over sex | 136 |
| 3.6 Towards an idealist metaphysics of gender | 143 |
| Appendix | 146 |
| Bibliography | 152 |

List of Abbreviations

AK = Abhidharmakośa (Treasury of Abhidharma)

AKBh = Abhidharmakośabhāṣya (Commentary on Treasury of Abhidharma)

AN = Aṅguttara Nikāya (Numbered Discourses)

Kd = Khandhaka (The Chapters)

MN = Majjhima Nikāya (Middle Discourses)

SN = Saṃyutta Nikāya (Connected Discourses)

T = Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō (The Taishō Tripiṭaka)

Vb = Vibhaṅga (Book of Analysis)

Abstract

Within the canonical *Sutta Piṭaka* (“Basket of Suttas”) of the classical South Asian Śrāvakayāna Buddhist tradition, the Buddha is depicted as claiming that there is something called ‘woman-*indriya*’ (*itth-indriya*) and something called ‘man-*indriya*’ (*puris-indriya*). While these claims appear only a handful of times in the extensive version of the *Sutta Piṭaka* that we have today, the rarity of canonical statements about gender meant that Śrāvakayāna Buddhist philosophers often invoked these two gender-related *indriyas* when advancing their metaphysical theories about gender.

In current scholarship about these gender-related *indriyas*, it is generally accepted that they mean the same thing across the *Sutta Piṭaka* and the later Abhidharma Buddhist commentarial texts—they are material faculties within the bodies of individuals, determining an individual’s biological sex characteristics and gendered behaviours. I disagree. In my dissertation, I focus on demonstrating three different metaphysical accounts of the gender-related *indriyas* that were found within the texts of the classical Śrāvakayāna tradition, resulting in a multiplicity of attitudes about gender.

The first chapter argues, based on the classical linguistic analysis (*nirvacana*) of ‘woman-*indriya*’ and ‘man-*indriya*’ and descriptions within the *Sutta Piṭaka*, that these terms refer to whatever is most powerful (*indriya*) over the soteriologically negative outcome of becoming fettered to a ‘woman self’ (*itth-attan*) and ‘man self’ (*puris-attan*). Here, I argue that the invocation of ‘woman self’ and ‘man self’ means that discussions about gender-related *indriyas* in the *Sutta*

Piṭaka should be understood as a further elaboration of the central claim within this collection of texts that any and all views of self are inaccurate and must be abandoned.

My second chapter focuses on identifying what is *indriya* or most powerful over this soteriological outcome within the *Sutta Piṭaka*. Based on the *Samyoga Sutta*'s description of an individual mentally generating (*manasi karoti*) what is *indriya* or most powerful over the fettering to a gendered self, I argue that 'indriya over woman' and 'indriya over man' are not described as singular material faculties, but as series of irrational mental generations (*ayoniso manasi-kāras*) on the part of the individual. These involve inaccurately labelling a variety of objects of attention as belonging to 'woman' or 'man' and as 'internal to self' or 'external to self', causing the individual to not only view the world through these gendered categories, but to become fettered to a gendered self.

My third chapter focuses on the later Abhidharma Buddhist tradition which formed around the teachings of the *Sutta Piṭaka*. Where current scholarship claims that there is a single Abhidharma Buddhist view of the gender *indriyas*, I demonstrate through records from the *Mahāvibhāṣā* ('The Great Compendium') that everything about the metaphysical status of the gender-related *indriyas* was up for debate. Eventually, the Abhidharma Vaibhāṣika view that these *indriyas* were real collections of atoms that held power over biological sex and gendered behaviour emerged as the dominant view. But even during this period, Vaibhāṣika-instructed philosophers like Vasubandhu pushed back against this view. Though he allowed that these *indriyas* were material faculties, he rejected that material entities could be most powerful over the arising of gendered conceptual distinctions and behaviours. He proposed a dualist account where these material *indriyas* were only powerful over biological sex, attributing gendered behaviour to consciousness or mind (*vijñāna*) instead.

Introduction

It was in 2015 that I first learned of Sakyadhita, an international coalition of Buddhist women dedicated to addressing gender-based injustice within their communities.¹ While attending their conference in Indonesia, I found myself listening with rapt attention as the Indonesian Bhikkhunī Ayyā Santinī spoke of the obstacles she faced in reestablishing a *bhikkhunī saṅgha*—a monastic order (*saṅgha*) for nuns (*bhikkhunīs*)—in Indonesia.

In 2000, Santinī, Susīlavatī, and Paññāvātī Padma became the first Indonesian women to receive full ordination in the Buddhist Theravāda tradition in roughly a thousand years.² Immediately after the three *bhikkhunīs* returned from their ordination in Taiwan, a joint agreement (*‘kesepakatan bersama’*) denouncing their ordination was released by the *bhikkhus* (*‘monks’*) of Saṅgha Theravāda Indonesia. Their statement read: ‘In this current time, there cannot again be a Buddhist religious way of life called *‘bhikkhunī’* that falls within the *Vinaya* code for the Theravāda sect.’³ This alludes to the view that following the demise of the Theravāda *bhikkhunī* order in 11th century CE, there can be no Theravāda *bhikkhunīs* until the future Buddha is reborn on earth.⁴ Since the canonical *Cakkavatti Sutta* asserts that before the next Buddha Metteyya is

¹ See Fenn and Koppedreyer which contains an excellent discussion on how Sakyadhita navigated early tensions about accessibility, white privilege, etc., resulting in adjustments to the movement’s approach: ‘Beneath the slogan “Think globally, act locally,” is an increasing shift in the structure of the organization and a recognition that specifically local needs cannot be subsumed under a universal mandate.’ (67)

² The Theravādin Bhikkhunī order had been fully wiped out by 11th century CE, and the majority opinion of Theravādin monks is that the *bhikkhunī* order cannot and should not be revived. Some contemporary Theravādin proponents of this view are the Thai Bhikkhu Phra Payutto and the American Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro (Geoffrey DeGraff).

³ All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated. ‘Pada masa sekarang ini tidak terdapat lagi cara hidup keagamaan Buddha yang disebut bhikkhuni dalam pelaksanaan *Vinaya* mazhab Theravada’ (Saṅgha Theravāda Indonesia).

⁴ For a recent defence of this view, see Ṭhānissaro’s argument for the claim that ‘the genuine Bhikkhunī Saṅgha is defunct, and cannot be revived until the next Buddha’ (“A Trojan Horse”).

reborn, the lifespan of humans must first decrease to ten years and then slowly increase back to eighty thousand years, this effectively means denying countless generations of Theravāda Buddhist women the same opportunities that have continually been afforded to Buddhist men.⁵

As local *bhikkhus* continued to reject the legitimacy of *bhikkhunīs*, refusing to speak to them and forbidding them from giving *Dhamma* talks,⁶ Santinī went to work founding Persaudaraan Bhikkhunī Theravāda Indonesia (Perbhiktin), which was dedicated to establishing sisterhood (*persaudaraan*) among the growing number of Indonesian *bhikkhunīs*.⁷ And Santinī was only one of the many Asian women who were making history by seeking to revive the Theravāda *bhikkhunī* order in their home countries. In 2001, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, a Thai professor of Religion and Philosophy at Thammasat University and one of the co-founders of *Sakyadhita*,⁸ was finally ordained as Bhikkhunī Dhammānanda after decades of involvement in the global Buddhist women's movement.⁹ In India, Bhikkhunī Sunīti was part of the second wave¹⁰ of contemporary Indian women to receive full ordination from 2009 to 2013 despite threats from

⁵ Chamsanit 294: 'For *bhikkhunī* and *samānerīs*, their unrecognized status may affect the various aspects of their lives including availability of a proper residences, mobility, educational opportunities in formal Buddhist institutions, and the opportunity to receive the same kinds of government support available to male monastic members. To give an example concerning mobility, a *samānerī* told me a story about how she, in her saffron monastic robes while waiting to board a train, was approached by a police officer who accused her of impersonating a monk and asked to check her ordination certificate.'

⁶ Santinī 70-71: '... when some *upāsakas* (and also *upāsikās*) accompany a monk or monks and meet a *bhikkhunī*, they follow the way the monk responds to the *bhikkhunī*'s greeting. When they see the monk turn his face away without saying anything, they awkwardly follow suit. Are *bhikkhunīs* second-class? Another example is that some monks forbid *bhikkhunīs* to give Dhamma talks, which confuses the *upāsakas* and *upāsikās*. Perhaps they are familiar with the Buddha's teaching that people's spiritual attainment is not determined by gender, wealth, or academic standing, and yet... No wonder the journey to enlightenment is difficult, if wrong views such as gender bias are held so tightly. This is ignorance (*moha*) at work.'

⁷ For more on the history of the Indonesian *bhikkhunī* revival movement, see Surya.

⁸ Fenn and Koppedrayar 48: 'Sakyadhita came into existence at a 1987 conference in Bodh Gaya, India, organized by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, an American Tibetan nun; Ayya Khema, a German-born Theravadin nun (now deceased); and Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (now Bhikkhuni Dhammananda), a professor at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand.'

⁹ See Dhammānanda 210.

¹⁰ The second *bhikkhunī* ordination in the contemporary revival movement was organised by Sakyadhita in 1998 in Bodhgaya, India, leading to the ordination of about 30 Indian *bhikkhunīs*. But in Sunīti's account of the subsequent events, the discriminatory attitude towards them was so strong that no *bhikkhunī* ordinations were performed in India for the next ten years (191).

the All India Bhikkhu Saṅgha.¹¹ Similar movements occurred in tandem in Sri Lanka¹² and Bangladesh,¹³ among other places, all led by Buddhist women who believed in the vision of a contemporary *bhikkhunī* order and were no longer willing to stay on the sidelines of Buddhist monastic practice.

As Buddhist women organised to revive the Theravāda *bhikkhunī* order, scholar-monks from the Global North publicly debated the legitimacy of the contemporary revival of the *bhikkhunī* order.¹⁴ Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro (Geoffrey DeGraff), a prominent American Pāli scholar, published in 2013 his *Vinaya*-based exegetical argument that the revival was illegitimate. Bhikkhu Anālayo, a prominent German Pāli scholar, responded in 2014 by publishing his own *Vinaya*-based argument that the revival was legitimate. Ṭhānissaro claimed that *Cullavagga* X.2, which allows for the ordination of *bhikkhunīs* without an existing *bhikkhunī* order, should be understood to have been rescinded upon the establishment of *Cullavagga* X.17.¹⁵ Anālayo argued that there was no such rescinding, and that *Cullavagga* X.2 applies to the current context.¹⁶ Anālayo made

¹¹ Sunīti 192: ‘This higher ordination ceremony, which was organized on November 25, 2013... was an important historical event for the Indian *bhikkhunī therīs* to successfully take the roles of *uppajjaya* (preceptors)... We are grateful to those venerable *bhikkhus* who were present at the ordination and served as witness, despite the threat declared by the All Indian Bhikkhu Saṅgha that they would be forced to disrobe.’

¹² Bhikkhunī Kusama was one of ten Sri Lankan women who received full ordination in a historic ceremony at Sarnath in 1996, marking the first such ordination in the contemporary revival movement. Afterwards, Kusama spent the next twenty years quietly conducting *bhikkhunī* ordinations in Sri Lanka, and by 2018 there were about 3000 Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs*—see Dwyer.

¹³ See Dīpānanda.

¹⁴ This really began in 2009, when Ṭhānissaro was asked by the Australian monk Ajahn Nyanadhammo to consult the Thai Administrative Council of Wat Nong Pah Pong on the legitimacy of a *bhikkhunī* ordination that had occurred in Australia that year (Bodhi, “Background” 3). His letter concluded that the ordination was illegitimate, which resulted in a slew of public refutations from Global North Pāli scholars Bhikkhu Bodhi (Jeffrey Block) and Ajahn Sujato (Anthony Best), as well as refutations from Global North Buddhist practitioners such as Ajahn Brahm (Peter Betts), Bhikkhunī Tathālokā (Heather Buske), and Bhikkhunī Sudhamma. These exchanges, however, were ostensibly only about the specific proceedings of that one *bhikkhunī* ordination, and it was only in 2013 that the legitimacy of *bhikkhunī* ordinations as a whole was publicly debated between Ṭhānissaro and Anālayo.

¹⁵ Ṭhānissaro, *The Buddhist Monastic Code II* 449f: ‘Because Cv.X.17.2, the passage allowing bhikkhus to give full Acceptance to a candidate who has been given Acceptance by the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, simply adds a new restriction to the earlier allowance given in Cv.X.2.1, it follows this second pattern. This automatically rescinds the earlier allowance... in the event that the original Bhikkhunī Saṅgha died out, Cv.X.17.2 prevents bhikkhus from granting Acceptance to women.’

¹⁶ Anālayo, “On the *Bhikkhunī* Ordination Controversy” 7: ‘The function of Cv X.2 is more specifically to enable the giving of the higher ordination to female candidates in a situation where no *bhikkhunī* order is in existence. This is unmistakably clear from the narrative context. In contrast, the function of Cv X.17 is to regulate the giving of the higher ordination to female candidates when a *bhikkhunī* order is in existence. This is also unmistakably clear from the narrative context. So there is a decisive difference

the moral argument that compassion (*karuṇā*) towards the struggles of Buddhist women necessitates the revival of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*.¹⁷ Ṭhānissaro rejected this argument from compassion, responding in 2015 that ‘establishing a poorly-trained Bhikkhunī Saṅgha based on questionable Dhamma is not an act of compassion for anyone.’¹⁸ Throughout their exchanges and open letters from 2014 to 2018, both monks agreed that the framing of this issue as one of ‘misogyny by chauvinist *bhikkhus*’ was ‘mistaken’—this issue was centrally about ‘*Vinaya* matters’ and not ‘feminist values’.¹⁹ Thus, gender-based discrimination and canonical texts discussing gender were not considered during this scholarly debate.²⁰

Santinī disagreed that the issue of *bhikkhunī* ordination could be discussed independently from issues related to gender. After dedicating the past fifteen years of her life to supporting Indonesian *bhikkhunīs* and having achieved the historic milestone of performing the first

between the two rules that needs to be taken into consideration: The two rules are meant to address two substantially different situations.’

¹⁷ Anālayo, “*Bhikkhunī* Ordination” 307: ‘... traditionalists affirming the critical importance of adherence to the rules in the Pāli *Vinaya* as the very heart of Theravāda monastic life and identity need to keep in mind the mandate for compassion and avoidance of harm as a central Buddhist value.’ This echoes an earlier argument in Bodhi, “Formalities of the Law, Qualities of the Heart” 5 that when determining whether women should have ‘the opportunity to lead the holy life in the way the Buddha himself intended women to live it, that is, as fully ordained bhikkhunis’, primacy should be given to ‘virtues such as loving-kindness, compassion, and generosity of spirit’.

¹⁸ Ṭhānissaro, “On Ordaining *Bhikkhunīs* Unilaterally”: ‘It’s not an act of compassion to the senior bhikkhunīs, who are creating the bad kamma of teaching when not qualified to do so; it’s not an act of compassion to the junior bhikkhunīs, who are getting trained by unqualified teachers; nor is it an act of compassion to the world, exposing it to teachers who create a false impression of how a true bhikkhunī should embody the Dhamma in word and deed.’

¹⁹ See Anālayo, “Open Letter to the Venerable”: ‘In my writings on *bhikkhunī* ordination I have been at pains to rectify the mistaken impression among considerable parts of the general public that resistance to the revival of the *bhikkhunī* Saṅgha is simply an expression of misogyny by chauvinist *bhikkhus* who are only concerned with clinging to their power and position. I have explained in detail why such a revival by relying on ordination carried out by members of a different tradition, who follow a different *Vinaya*, is problematic and that this needs to be honestly recognized rather than just be brushed aside as vain excuses. I have also tried to clarify that feminist values are not of direct relevant [sic.] to *Vinaya* matters and that, from the very same viewpoint of discrimination, it is not really acceptable to turn a blind eye on the right of a religious tradition to maintain its customs and observances.’

²⁰ Sujato 15: ‘The essential problem here is not *Vinaya* legalities, but the injustice of excluding women from full participation in the holy life. Until we acknowledge this central fact, any legal argument will miss the point.’ And by the end of Ṭhānissaro and Anālayo’s exchange, Anālayo seemed to have given up on framing this as a *Vinaya* issue. In his “Second Open Letter to the venerable” and also his last word on this issue to Ṭhānissaro, he raised for the first time the discrimination against women and the duty to protect ‘women’s rights’: ‘Discrimination against women is one of the most depressing features of the Buddhist traditions, causing so much unnecessary pain. If my attempt to offer a contribution toward diminishing that pain makes me the object of hostility and aggression, then I am ready for that. Women’s right to full participation in the monastic life, which the Buddha originally granted them, deserves to be protected.’

contemporary Theravāda *bhikkhunī* ordination in Indonesia just two days before travelling to Jogja for the conference,²¹ Santinī had little interest in rehashing decades-old discussions about the monastic code and the historical demise of the *bhikkhunī* order. It may be a fact that the *bhikkhunī* order died out in the 11th century because it was deemed that there were insufficient *bhikkhunīs* within the tradition to perform further ordinations,²² but Santinī thought it was far more pressing to acknowledge why there had been such a dearth of *bhikkhunīs* compared to *bhikkhus* in the first place—it was ‘not because women no longer aspired to become *bhikkhunīs*, but because they literally could not survive as *bhikkhunīs*.’²³

Santinī’s experiences also led her to be sceptical of arguments from monks that ‘there was no way to establish [the *bhikkhunī* order] again’—in her experience, it was not so much that there was no way to do this, but rather that ‘there were no monks who wanted to ordain women as *bhikkhunīs*.’^{24 25} For her, the framing of *bhikkhunī* ordination as an exegetical disagreement about specific monastic codes did not match up to her lived experiences. The monks who snubbed and isolated her and her fellow *bhikkhunīs* by turning away and refusing to speak to them did not do

²¹ Bliss: ‘Setelah sempat terlelap selama lebih dari 1000 tahun di Indonesia, silsilah bhikkhuni mazhab Theravada di Indonesia bangkit kembali melalui upacara Upasampada Bhikkhuni Theravada Pertama di Indonesia yang diadakan pada bulan Waisak 2559 BE/2015, tepatnya pada Minggu (21/6/2015).’

²² Tsomo, “Sakyadhita Pilgrimage in Asia” 104: ‘The argument against the full ordination of women states that a *bhikkhunī* must be ordained by ten *bhikkhus* and ten *bhikkhunīs*, but since the Theravāda lineage of *bhikkhunīs* has died out, there is no one to ordain Buddhist nuns in Thailand today. If confronted with the fact that tens of thousands of *bhikkhunīs* are alive and well in Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, China, and other countries today, opponents respond that these nuns belong to the Mahāyāna tradition and there is no Theravāda lineage for nuns in existence today. When reminded of the fact that neither Theravāda nor Mahāyāna traditions existed at the time when the Buddha established the order of fully ordained nuns, even the most conservative would have to agree. But when confronted by the fact that hundreds of Theravāda nuns are practicing in Sri Lanka today, having received *bhikkhunī* ordination via Korea or Taiwan, the conversation typically comes to an abrupt end.’ Also see Goonatilake and Chamsanit, which discuss these arguments in greater detail.

²³ Santinī 69. Also see Falk, which theorises based on Yi Jing’s (6–7th century CE) records about monks and nuns in India that there was a great disparity between the economic support given to monks and nuns. As Falk quotes Takakusu Junjirō’s translation of Yi Jing’s observations, ‘The benefit and supply to the female members of the Order are very small, and monasteries of many a place have no special supply of food for them.’ (211)

²⁴ Santinī 69.

²⁵ This was perhaps the veiled implication of Bhikkhunī Tathālokā’s aside in her 2009 reply to Ṭhānissaro, where she mentioned that Ṭhānissaro was notably not present at a major scholarly gathering dedicated to researching whether legitimate methods of ordaining *bhikkhunīs* could be found: ‘(We missed Ajahn Thanissaro in Hamburg.)’ (17)

so out of scholarly disagreement about how the monastic code should be interpreted. Rather, Santinī explained that this was a result of their clinging to ‘wrong views such as gender bias’ leading them to treat women as ‘second class people and... second class disciples’.²⁶ At the same conference, the Australian Pāli scholar Bhikkhu Sujato (Anthony Best) supported Santinī’s observations by recounting his own failed attempts at discussing the textual bases for *bhikkhunī* ordination with other monks:

I was very naïve. I thought that if the monks could learn about the situation, we would respond in an informed, compassionate manner. How wrong I was! What struck me was how little reason there was in the discussion, and how much energy. Whenever *bhikkhunīs* were mentioned, otherwise reasonable men came up with all kinds of absurd, irrational statements, pushed by a palpable psychic force: a compulsive need to deny the reality of *bhikkhunīs* at all costs. Many of the patriarchs are, it seems, quite willing to destroy themselves and their religion in order to deny *bhikkhunīs*.²⁷

Santinī’s success in sustaining and growing her local *bhikkhunī* community did not come from trying to debate monks who would not speak to her. Rather, her efforts were focused on supporting the Buddhist women in her community. At the conference, she recounted meeting with many Buddhist women who had been taught that ‘men are superior to women and that only men can be successful in their search to find the end of suffering’. This, she recounted, made it difficult for them to fully believe that they ‘equally [had] the right and possibility to attain *nibbana* [Skt: *nirvāṇa*]’ She realised that it was not just men who held wrong views related to gender bias, for ‘this ignorance can also exist deeply in the minds of women themselves’, causing them to struggle with immense self-doubt.²⁸

²⁶ Santinī 70, 71.

²⁷ Sujato, “The Imaginarium of the Nuns” 213.

²⁸ Santinī 71.

Santinī framed this sort of internalised misogyny as a mental hindrance (*nīvaraṇa*) that needed to be destroyed. And while she saw the act of reviving the *bhikkhunī* order as a visible proof of concept that could temporarily destabilise this sort of thinking,²⁹ Santinī thought that the mental hindrance of misogyny could only be fully destroyed through ‘*Dhamma* knowledge and wisdom’—i.e., knowledge and wisdom of the Buddha’s teachings (*Dhamma*). This, Santinī urged, was a necessary component of fulfilling the ‘duty to work together to empower women’.³⁰ Thus, unlike Buddhists who found it prudent to set aside discussions of gender, Santinī believed that gaining knowledge of a canonical view of women was of central importance to promoting the empowerment of Buddhist women. To this effect, Santinī continually affirmed to the women in her community and abroad that ‘the Buddha taught that women have the same potential as men to attain the highest goal in life, which is to get out of *samsāra*’, that the Buddha ‘confirmed that women have the same potential to strive toward the goal of attaining *nibbāna*’, and that it is canonically confirmed that ‘women themselves have proved that they can do so.’³¹

Santinī’s experiences with local activism, as well as her theoretical understanding of a link between mental hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*) and wrong view (*diṭṭhi*) led her to prioritise knowledge about a canonical view of women, and she was certainly not alone in this sentiment. Back in 1993, American Buddhist feminist scholar Rita Gross had articulated the importance of uncovering a canonical past for Buddhist women in her introduction to *Buddhism After Patriarchy*:

A “usable past” is important precisely because a religious community constitutes itself by means of its collective memory, the past that it recalls and emulates... When the record discounts or ignores women, the community is telling itself and its women something about

²⁹ Santinī 71: ‘The revival of the *bhikkhunī* order comes as a surprise to them. Maybe they realise for the first time that women can also become free.’

³⁰ Santinī 71.

³¹ Santinī 69.

women's potential and place in the community. Likewise, when women's studies discovers a past for women, even a heroic past, in some cases, the whole community is reshaped. Therefore, the stories that people tell, the history they remember, are crucial to empowering or disempowering whole segments of the community.³²

The Buddhist 'canon' has never been a static or uncontested thing. It is generally accepted within the tradition that the intellectual history of Buddhism began in 5th century BCE with the teachings of Siddhārtha Gautama, also known as the Buddha ('awakened one'). Siddhārtha Gautama was said to have taught until his death in 4th century BCE, at which point his disciples were said to have congregated to compile his teachings into two *piṭakas* or 'baskets'—the *Sutta Piṭaka* ('Basket of Suttas') and the *Vinaya Piṭaka* ('Basket of Monastic Codes').³³ The *Sutta Piṭaka* compiles early Buddhist philosophical teachings (*Dhamma*), and it is traditionally believed that each sutta records Siddhārtha Gautama's own teachings to his immediate followers.³⁴ Likewise, the monastic codes in the *Vinaya Piṭaka* are traditionally presented as having been laid down by Siddhārtha Gautama himself. Thus, these two compilations are generally regarded to be canonical across the Buddhist tradition.

³² Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy* 20.

³³ See Willemen et al., and also see their qualification that 'The development of this *Sūtrapiṭaka* and *Vinayapiṭaka* from the time of the First Synod onward until the canon assumed its present format, cannot, however, be traced in much detail. Since terms such as "teacher of the sutras" (*suttantika*), "proclaimer of the Dharma" (*dharmakathika*), "upholder of the Vinaya" (*vinayadhara*) and "upholder of the Dharma" (*dharmadhara*) began appearing, it appears that soon after the Buddha's death, monks had begun to specialize either in the *Dharma* or in the *Vinaya*' (5).

³⁴ The traditional belief is that each of these suttas were heard first-hand by Siddhārtha Gautama's immediate followers, who memorised his teachings and passed them down to their students by means of oral recitation (Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* 38-9). It is impossible to verify whether the Suttas we have today do in fact trace back to Siddhārtha Gautama's original teachings, and even if they do, the extant record appears to be the result of at least several hundreds of years (see Hartman) of revision, formulation (see Shulman), and intentional changes by various Buddhist councils and monastic communities. There is evidence that memorisation, communal recitation, and verbatim transmission were requisites of early Buddhist monastic life (c. 5th-3rd century BCE), and such practices are designed to ensure word-for-word accuracy and homogeneity of a text across time—see Lamotte; Allon "The Oral Composition and Transmission of Early Buddhist Texts", *The Composition and Transmission of Early Buddhist Texts with Specific Reference to Sutras*; Anālayo "The Brahmajāla and the Early Buddhist Oral Tradition (1) and (2)". Nevertheless, Allon demonstrates from his examination of various Pāli, Gāndhārī, and Sanskrit manuscripts that we are able to track the gradual implementation of major changes in wording and formula across time (*Three Gāndhārī Ekottarikāgama-Type Sūtras* 36-7). Shulman also argues that the highly formulaic nature of the suttas shows that they were not an attempt to preserve the Buddha's words, but to creatively elaborate on them.

But by 3rd century BCE, disagreements about how these philosophical teachings and monastic codes should be interpreted led to splits in the early order, causing multiple Buddhist sects to arise. As different sects developed their own philosophical interpretations of the suttas, they began composing their own verses and commentaries for the purposes of memorisation and instruction, which would then take on canonical status within that particular sect. Thus, it could be said that multiple Buddhisms emerged at this point, and that their choices about which elements of the *Sutta Piṭaka* and *Vinaya Piṭaka* to highlight and which to set aside in their commentaries led to additional divergences in how the canonical past was remembered and understood by each sect. Additionally, the first century BCE saw the emergence of another set of Buddhist scriptures known as the *Mahāyāna Sūtras*,³⁵ and these were taken to be canonical by a sect of Buddhists known as Mahāyāna (‘The Great Vehicle’) Buddhists. In Mahāyāna, the *Sutta Piṭaka* is often treated as canonical but surface-level teachings, and the *Mahāyāna Sūtras* are prioritised as revealing deeper truths about the Buddhist teachings.

Where the canons of contemporary Buddhisms were concerned, Gross highlighted that although discussions about women—and notably *by* women in a section of the *Sutta Piṭaka* called the *Therīgāthā* (‘Verses by the Senior Nuns’)—are ‘explicitly discussed in texts from all major periods of Buddhist history’,³⁶ these had mostly been ignored by practitioners and academics in the Global North. Here, Gross identified an egalitarian streak in early Buddhism that received little attention, and it was the very same egalitarian teaching or *Dhamma* that Santinī would emphasise in her speech at *Sakyadhita* many years later:

Never at stake is women's ability to pursue and achieve the early Buddhist goal of nibbana or peace. The Buddha is never represented, in earlier texts, as saying that women could not

³⁵ Hirakawa 252.

³⁶ Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy* 23.

achieve that goal and a number of verses in the Pali canon represent him as saying that women could or did achieve the goal. He does not refuse women on grounds of their inability and is induced to change his mind [about women joining his order as mendicants] by Ananda's challenges to him about their ability.³⁷

However, where Santinī's strategy was to focus on the egalitarian view of women in the canonical texts, Gross also focused on identifying instances in the canonical texts where 'the Buddhist treatment of women has been inappropriate, neither in accord with the ideals and norms of Buddhism nor with other, more egalitarian, examples from the Buddhist record'.³⁸ As Gross argued, acknowledging any and all instances of such views in the canonical texts is important for understanding how these might have contributed to a diminished view of women within the tradition. Should such views be found, it becomes as important to reconsider and reconstruct the patriarchal aspects of the canonical texts as it is to uphold the egalitarian aspects of these texts. Thus, Gross proceeded to survey a wide range of South Asian Buddhist texts, concluding that a multiplicity of attitudes towards women were present in these texts:

Buddhist resources are neither black nor white, neither wholly patriarchal nor wholly non-patriarchal, but quite mixed. With these resources available, the contemporary Buddhist seeking to construct an equitable position on gender issues can readily see both how "good" and how "bad" the [Buddhist] models are. One can readily see that there is a traditional basis from which to argue for more equitable gender relations as the norm for Buddhism, as well as a need to toss out certain conventions because they are so hopelessly sexist.³⁹

³⁷ Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy* 34.

³⁸ Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy* 22: 'However, at the same time, it is equally important, on the basis of an accurate, rather than a whitewashed, record, to call that past "patriarchal" when the assessment fits. Having enough information to be able to make this judgement is critically important for a feminist revalorization of Buddhism. Without this information, many conservative Buddhists claim that the Buddhist treatment of women is without problem and does not need to be reconsidered and reconstructed.'

³⁹ Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy* 26.

What Gross found to be salvageable within the canonical texts of the Theravāda tradition was limited. Of these texts, she only identified the *Therīgāthā* as providing something like a “usable past” for Theravādin women. Gross also noted that the Mahāyāna (‘The Great Vehicle’) texts went ‘much further in proclaiming women's capabilities than almost any text from early Indian Buddhism’. As Gross notes in her book, it is within the Mahāyāna corpus that we see an emphasis on a philosophy of emptiness (Skt: *śūnyatā*), resulting in a wealth of allegories about awakened women who, on account of their complete understanding of emptiness, are able to spontaneously change their appearance from that of a woman to a man and back again:

Equally important for understanding the motif of the “changing of the female sex” is the Mahāyāna philosophical emphasis on all-pervasive emptiness, which means there are no fixed, immutable essences or traits anywhere, no inherent qualities in any being or thing. Therefore, one cannot label or categorize one's world or the people one meets on the basis of superficial traits... Furthermore, gender itself contains nothing fixed or inherent. One only appears to be female or male; because nothing has fixed, inherent existence, it could not be said that one is male or female. One needs always to be open-ended and flexible in one's categorization of experience, because nothing is defined or limited by an immutable, fixed essence.⁴⁰

Here, two things are important to note. With regards to egalitarianism, Gross makes the point that the Mahāyāna tradition—though certainly not a monolith on this issue⁴¹—was significantly more affirmative than the texts within the Theravāda tradition about the equal capacities of women and men to become awakened. And with regards to a theory of gender, Gross’ identification of

⁴⁰ Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy* 67.

⁴¹ Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy* 61: ‘In most of the [Mahāyāna] texts to be considered in detail, those misogynist attitudes are countermanded, retracted, or demonstrated to be false. But in some documents, they stand. A particularly virulent example, the opinion of an important philosopher, is found in Asaṅga's *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, an important text. He explains why Buddhas are never female: “... All women are by nature full of defilement and of weak intelligence. And not by one who is full of defilement and of weak intelligence is completely perfected Buddhahood attained.”’

emptiness as having the implication that ‘there are no fixed, immutable essences or traits anywhere, no inherent qualities in any being or thing’ suggests a metaphysical reason behind Mahāyāna’s embrace of gender egalitarianism⁴² and Theravāda’s struggle to do the same.

The term emptiness (*suññatā*) only appears a handful of times in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, and when it does, it does not have the thoroughgoing metaphysical implication that there are no ‘inherent qualities⁴³ in any being or thing’.⁴⁴ Though we do see metaphysical analyses being employed within these suttas, these were only employed as far as was necessary to eliminate our psychological attachment to those specific things to which we tend to form irrational and harmful attachments. No one, for instance, would become attached to the useless broken shards of a pot, so there is no ethical need to interrogate how each shard exists and whether they have inherent qualities or not.⁴⁵ Thus, unlike the case of Mahāyāna where endorsing a metaphysics of emptiness automatically makes it such that any and all things—including gendered distinctions—are empty, the *Sutta Piṭaka* does not offer the same resources for making that kind of unilateral conclusion.

In Gross’ last few writings before her passing in 2015, she noted that the field had changed. In tandem with the Buddhist women’s movement and the revival of the *bhikkhunī* order, feminist Buddhist scholarship within the Global North had grown exponentially. Indeed, within the study of classical South Asian Buddhism, there is now a wealth of research on the narrative portrayals of women within the classical texts.⁴⁶ However, Gross thought it was a shortcoming of the field

⁴² Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy* 189: ‘the concepts of emptiness and Buddha-nature provide a very firm basis to argue that gender equality is a normative, rather than an optional position, for Buddhists.’

⁴³ As I will address in my final chapter of the dissertation, this notion of ‘inherent qualities’ does not feature in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, but arises in later commentarial works.

⁴⁴ E.g., see the *Godatta Sutta*, where emptiness (*suññatā*) is depicted as a means of viewing objects where we recognise that it would be inaccurate to incorporate them into our ‘self’ (*atta*) or treat them as ‘belonging to self’ (*attaniya*)—‘this is uninhabited by self or belonging to self’ (*suññam idaṃ attena vā attaniyena vā*, *SN* 41.7).

⁴⁵ I discuss this example in detail in my third chapter.

⁴⁶ E.g., Paul; Schuster; Tsomo, *Sisters in Solitude*; Skilling; Osto; Engelmajer; Collett.

that—barring some notable exceptions which studied Buddhist portrayals of masculinity⁴⁷ and Buddhist taxonomies of gender⁴⁸—research on gender in Buddhism was nearly always research about women in Buddhism.⁴⁹ For in the time between *Buddhism After Patriarchy* and 2015, Gross had started to teach that the discrimination against women was one symptom of a larger issue—namely, that all human beings have been ‘locked into the prison of gender roles’:⁵⁰

When women talk about the prison of gender roles or about sexism and patriarchy, it can sound as if they affect only women, leaving men unscathed. There is much less awareness of the downside of the prison of gender roles for men and also much less willingness to acknowledge that there is a downside for men. But, to dismantle that prison, it is critically important to look at it from both sides.⁵¹

Buddhism Beyond Gender would have been Gross’ magnum opus on the topic. Unfortunately, she passed away before the book could be completed, resulting in several unfinished sections including a ‘placeholder for a discussion on transgender issues’.⁵² Still, Gross does mention in her explanation of the prison of gender roles that it involves a ‘lethal cocktail of extreme sexual dimorphism, enforced heteronormativity, and male privilege’, making it unsurprising that individuals have responded by resisting these ‘conventional gender arrangements’ and ‘developing

⁴⁷ For notable exceptions prior to 2013, see *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, edited by Cabezón, and Power’s *A Bull of a Man*, which contains an extensive treatment of early Buddhist writings on the Buddha’s ideal masculinity.

⁴⁸ Prior to 2013, this was mostly found in Sweet and Zwilling’s work on classical Indian gender taxonomies in the 1990s, which would occasionally discuss Abhidharma taxonomies of gender. Additionally, Scherer published a short article on gender identity and gender transformations in 2006, highlighting the Buddha’s ‘laconic and pragmatic’ reaction towards ‘sex/gender crossing’ in the *Vinaya* and the acknowledgement of ‘non-normative sex/gender identities’ in the early Buddhist texts.

⁴⁹ Gross, *Buddhism and Gender*: ‘By 2012, books and articles pertaining to Buddhism and gender had become too numerous to count, and no one scholar can be an expert on all topics pertaining to Buddhism and gender... Scholarship exploring masculinity—what men do and think specifically as men rather than as humans—has lagged behind significantly in Buddhist studies as in all other fields. Additionally, scholarship about less dominant sexual orientations is sparse. As a result, there is considerable overlap and confusion between the categories “women” and “gender,” and many assume that anything having to do with “gender” will in fact be about women.’

⁵⁰ Gross, *Buddhism Beyond Gender* 3.

⁵¹ Gross, *Buddhism Beyond Gender* 48.

⁵² Gross, *Buddhism Beyond Gender* i.

alternative gender identities'.⁵³ Her friend and colleague Judith Simmer-Brown writes in the introduction of *Buddhism Beyond Gender* that this unfinished section might have answered one of Simmer-Brown's most pressing questions upon reading the manuscript:

Rita, what more could you say about critiques of the gender binary itself that imprisons not only women and men but also those who do not identify with either? Could you address transgender practitioners?⁵⁴

It is unfortunate that we will never know what Gross might have said on the topic. Still, there were others who had been working away at this topic, and the 2010s saw a modest increase in research on the gender binary and gender transformation.⁵⁵ Of particular interest to this dissertation is the rise in research about 'gender *indriyas*'. This traces back to the Buddha's claims within the *Sutta Piṭaka* that there is something called a 'woman-*indriya*' (*itth-indriya*) and something called a 'man-*indriya*' (*puris-indriya*). Śrāvakayāna Buddhists—a label which encompasses all the non-Mahāyāna Buddhists who take the *Sutta Piṭaka* to be both canonical and authoritative—proceeded to adopt these terms in their theorising about gender.

In 2010, Carol Anderson discussed these two *indriyas* as a 'female faculty' and a 'male faculty'. Responding to Sweet and Zwilling's 1993 characterisation of these *indriyas* as proof that early Buddhists held an essentialist viewpoint on gender,⁵⁶ Anderson argued that if essentialism is understood as the view that 'there is a biological basis to the differences between men and women' then these *indriyas* do not imply gender essentialism, for these *indriyas* are not the biological basis

⁵³ Gross, *Buddhism Beyond Gender* 16.

⁵⁴ Gross, *Buddhism Beyond Gender* x-xi.

⁵⁵ Below, I discuss the literature focusing on gender *indriyas*, but also see Scherer's short exploratory paper in 2006, which developed in the next decade into an extended discussion on (1) *paṇḍakas*, who are described by the Buddhist texts as lacking 'normative gender characteristic/ expression' (255), as well as (2) the *Vinaya*'s portrayal of the Buddha's non-judgmental response to 'instances of sex/gender change within the early monastic community' ("Variant Dharmas" 256). Other works include Artinger, which discusses precedents for the ordination of transgender individuals.

⁵⁶ Sweet and Zwilling 604.

of gendered differences, but are instead ‘controlling faculties [which are responsible for] shaping what we understand today to be both biological sex and gender’.⁵⁷ In 2016, Anderson developed this view further by discussing instances of gender transformation in the *Vinaya*. She argued that even though these gender *indriyas* control one’s sex and gender, ‘Buddhist analyses of sex change locate causality in one’s actions’—specifically, it is suggested that one’s past moral actions (*kamma*) might result in transformations of one’s sex and gender. This, Anderson concludes, suggests that ‘sex and gender were conceived as relatively fluid’.⁵⁸

Then in 2017, José Cabezón published his long-awaited book, *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism*. In this monumental study, Cabezón surveys a wide selection of texts on sexuality from various Buddhist traditions. It becomes even more ambitious at the midpoint of the book, where Cabezón makes it clear that the traditions’ attitudes towards sexuality are also entangled with specific understandings of gender. Since gender matters in understanding these attitudes towards sexuality, Cabezón also takes on the gargantuan task of surveying Buddhist theories of gender. The discussions in Anderson and Cabezón represent the first forays into articulating a Śrāvakayāna account of gender based on the gender *indriyas*. So where Mahāyāna Buddhists base their account of gender on a metaphysics of emptiness, Anderson and Cabezón present Śrāvakayāna Buddhists like the Theravādins as basing their account of gender on these two gender *indriyas*.

But even though Cabezón acknowledges the same kind of gender fluidity⁵⁹ that Anderson identifies as arising from the belief in spontaneous gender transformation, Cabezón notes that the

⁵⁷ Anderson, “The Agency of Buddhist Nuns” 54.

⁵⁸ Anderson, “Changing Sex in Pāli Buddhist Monastic Literature” 236, 235.

⁵⁹ Cabezón additionally identifies that this sort of gender fluidity arises not only through spontaneous gender transformation, but also through the belief in the reincarnation cycle: ‘As the *Dhammapada Commentary* states, “there are no men who have not, at some time or other, been women, and no women who have not, at some time or other, been men.” Gender and biological sex are therefore mutable and contingent, and anyone who fixates on their present sex and gender assignment—or that of their beloved—

indriyas of the *Sutta Piṭaka* presume a real gender binary and do not provide convincing grounds for the proclaimed aim of transcending or escaping (*ativattati*) gender—in Gross’ terms, gender *indriyas* not only fail to explain how we are supposed to escape the ‘prison of gender roles’, but the presumption that these two gender *indriyas* exist is an active hindrance to this aim. Moreover, Cabezón advances a view of the gender *indriyas* according to which these *indriyas* are either biological or material—they sometimes refer directly to the genitals, and in other instances are a material substance within the body.

If we accept Anderson’s characterisation of essentialism as the view that ‘there is a biological basis to the differences between men and women’, then the framing of gender *indriyas* as either material or biological seems to fit the definition. Indeed, even if the *Vinaya* acknowledges cases of gender transformation where an individual’s biological or material *indriyas* might change from one to the other, the suggestion that their changed gender is based on and justified by a corresponding change in their biological or material *indriya* shares some commonalities with a specific form of biological essentialism known as transgender essentialism or transmedicalism.⁶⁰ In this view, transgender identities are not framed as a rejection of enforced binary gender roles, but are justified on biological grounds (e.g. ‘born in the wrong body’) and medical grounds (e.g. gender dysphoria arising from being ‘born in the wrong body’). Thus, when Anderson proceeds to note in 2018 that she and Cabezón ‘are in agreement on the role of the faculties and the material basis of gendered behavior in these texts’,⁶¹ I argue that this is a sufficient basis for treating Anderson’s portrayal of the *Piṭaka* material as a gender essentialist one. Anderson’s conclusion

is said to be obsessing over a drop in the otherwise infinite ocean of gender and sexual possibilities that human beings have repeatedly lived out.’ (335)

⁶⁰ E.g., Plaskow: ‘Just as Mary Daly’s transphobia was deeply interwoven with gender essentialism, so too there are essentialist strands within trans narratives that do not so much explode gender as firmly redraw its boundaries. I would have liked to see Strassfeld acknowledge this tension between different understandings of transgender and talk about the feminist implications of transgender essentialism.’

⁶¹ Anderson and Manring, n. 12.

that essentialism is automatically averted by the *Vinaya*'s view that 'matter changes, and gender can fluctuate'⁶² does not hold when (1) binary gender remains grounded in the existence of two kinds of biological or material *indriyas*, and (2) gender changes are only justified by corresponding changes in these biological or material *indriyas*.

If Cabezón and Anderson are right that this is the only way of interpreting the gender *indriyas* in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, then it is no wonder that Mahāyāna Buddhists were so much more successful than non-Mahāyāna or Śrāvakayāna Buddhists at avoiding gender essentialism and affirming the abilities of all beings to attain awakening regardless of their assigned gender. Additionally, if it is as Gross claims and the only canonical text providing usable grounds for gender egalitarianism is the small selection of verses in the *Therīgāthā*, then it would seem entirely inevitable that non-Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions like the Theravāda tradition not only failed to sustain a *bhikkhunī* order but remain virulently resistant to any contemporary attempts to revive it. As Gross wrote in *Buddhism After Patriarchy* about the differences between the Mahāyāna Buddhists view of gender and the Śrāvakayāna one:

This long-standing divide on women's issues is important today, for it is difficult to avoid the impression that the Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism provide more suitable ground for serious women practitioners and a feminist transvaluation of Buddhism than do the Theravāda forms.⁶³

When supporting the Theravādin women in her community, Santinī taught that the mental hindrance of misogyny could only be fully destroyed through knowledge and wisdom of the Buddha's teachings (*Dhamma*). In her view, the Buddha's teachings in the *Sutta Piṭaka* could be used to empower those who had been discriminated against on the basis of gender, giving them

⁶² Anderson and Manring, 314.

⁶³ Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy* 43.

confidence that their ability to attain awakening could not be affected by something as trivial as one's assigned gender. But in the absence of alternatives to Cabezón and Anderson's reading of the *Suttas*, one is hard-pressed to find any good reasons to believe that an accurate understanding of the Theravādin *Dhamma* would result in an account of gender that is conducive not only to gender egalitarianism but also to escaping our enforced gender roles. After all, these cannot be accurately characterised as mere 'roles', for they are determined by the real biological or material entities that exist within us. And should a Theravāda or Śrāvakayāna Buddhist ask 'how might I employ the *Dhamma* to escape gender?', it may seem like the only good answers are 'you would have to fully reconstruct a Śrāvakayāna view of gender that excludes these essentialist gender *indriyas*' or 'consider becoming a Mahāyāna Buddhist instead.'

This is not my reading of the Śrāvakayāna Buddhist texts. If the philosophy of emptiness is what grounds the Mahāyāna Buddhist account of gender, then it would be inaccurate and misleading to claim that the corresponding grounds for the Śrāvakayāna Buddhist account of gender is the gender *indriyas*. Rather, I demonstrate in my dissertation that what actually grounds the Śrāvakayāna Buddhist account of gender is the philosophy of 'no-self' (Pāli: *anattan*; Skt: *anātman*). What no-self means and implies differs for the various Śrāvakayāna Buddhist sects, but all Buddhist discussions of no-self are grounded in the metaphysical belief that (1) all things are conditioned by their causes in such a way that it becomes inappropriate to psychologically internalise anything as 'self' or 'belonging to self', and (2) that our desire to internalise things as 'self' or 'belonging to self' arises from our inaccurate labelling of the things that we attend to as having features that we find attractive when they do not in fact have those features. Thus far, discussions of the gender *indriyas* have entirely ignored the underlying metaphysical argument that runs throughout the *Sutta Piṭaka*, drawing conclusions about the gender *indriyas* and the

Śrāvakayāna Buddhist view of gender in a way that is entirely divorced from the central belief in no-self. This is particularly problematic when the *Samyoga Sutta*, which contains the most extensive treatment of the gender *indriyas* in the canonical *Sutta Piṭaka*, specifically links the mental generation (*manasi-kāra*) of ‘woman-*indriya*’ and ‘man-*indriya*’ to a psychological fettering (*saṃyojana*) to a ‘woman self’ (*itth-attan*) and ‘man self’ (*puris-attan*).

My dissertation is an attempt to show that despite the disparities between the resources that the Mahāyāna and Śrāvakayāna traditions offer on affirming gender egalitarianism and escaping from enforced gender roles, the Śrāvakayāna tradition does have more resources to support that same conclusion than have been acknowledged by the field thus far. They do not have the Mahāyāna commitment to emptiness, but they still share with Mahāyāna a commitment to no-self. Thus, in chapters 1 and 2 of my dissertation, I survey the *Sutta Piṭaka*, drawing on a range of *suttas* about no-self, *indriyas*, and irrational mental generation (*ayoniso manasi-kāra*) to offer an intertextual interpretation of the *Samyoga Sutta*’s mentions of ‘woman-*indriya*’ and ‘man-*indriya*’. When read together with these three sets of *suttas*, I argue that it becomes clear that within the texts of the *Sutta Piṭaka*, there is never an insinuation that ‘woman-*indriya*’ and ‘man-*indriya*’ are biological or material. Rather, when it comes to gender, the term “*indriya*” is used to describe a series of irrational mental generations on our part, and the *Samyoga Sutta*’s argument is that the Buddhist practitioner needs to dispel these irrational mental generations in order to escape (*ativattati*) from their deeply held and irrational belief in the reality of a ‘woman self’ and ‘man self’.

In chapter 3 of my dissertation, I proceed to acknowledge some of the tensions that arose in later Śrāvakayāna Buddhist interpretations of ‘woman-*indriya*’ and ‘man-*indriya*’. Since the Śrāvakayāna Buddhists did not agree with the Mahāyāna claim that everything is empty, this

historically provided some room for those who endorsed the *Sutta Piṭaka* to dispute whether gender was an ‘inherent quality’ of individuals or not.⁶⁴ In the centuries after the *Sutta Piṭaka*, multiple sects of Śrāvakayāna Buddhists emerged, with each offering differing metaphysical accounts of reality. My final chapter will focus on a Śrāvakayāna Buddhist tradition known as the Abhidharma tradition, which elaborated upon the metaphysical claims within the *Sutta Piṭaka* by endorsing a metaphysics of thoroughgoing eliminativism—things that could be explained away by their parts were identified as mere conventional designations (*prajñaptis*); things that could not be explained away were identified as material or mental fundamental entities (*dravyas*). After this framework was established, debates ensued about (1) whether gender *indriyas* should be taken to be fundamental entities or conceptual designations, (2) whether the gender *indriyas* should be taken to be mental or material, (3) what aspects of ‘woman’ (Skt: *strī*) and ‘man’ (Skt: *puruṣa*) are explained by these *indriyas*, and (4) whether and how these *indriyas* are ‘powerful’ over gender.

By the fourth intellectual period of Abhidharma Buddhism (c. 4th century CE), the Abhidharma Vaibhāṣika view that the gender *indriyas* were material had become the dominant view that was taught to Abhidharma monastics. This naturally resulted in a dominant belief that gendered behaviours were determined by material *indriyas*, leading to the exact kind of gender essentialism that Anderson discusses in her work. But even when gender essentialism started to become the dominant view in Abhidharma Buddhism, I demonstrate contrary to Cabezón that there were Ābhidharmikas who continued to argue that this gender essentialism was inconsistent with the Buddhist commitment to no-self. Where Cabezón speaks of a general Abhidharma view of the gender *indriyas* during this period, I argue that even in this period of Abhidharma Buddhism, there

⁶⁴ While it is certainly possible for a Theravāda Buddhist to conclude that gender is an inherent quality of individuals and affirm the egalitarian view that women and men are equally capable of attaining enlightenment (e.g., Plato’s argument that women can be philosopher-rulers in *Republic V*), the assertion of an inherent difference between individuals based on gender was often used as a precursor to justify inherent gender-based differences and disparities in abilities, interests, behaviours, etc.

were at least two competing views of the gender *indriyas*. The first view I discuss in my final chapter is the Vaibhāṣika view that was endorsed by philosophers like Saṅghabhadra; the second view that I discuss is the Sautrāntika (‘followers of the suttas’) view that was advanced by the philosopher Vasubandhu. The first view is gender essentialist; the second view is not.

When it comes to Vasubandhu’s view of the gender *indriyas*, I also indirectly argue against Scherer’s claim that the distinction between biological sex and gender is not made anywhere in Classical India:

The first striking point we need to keep in mind is that the distinction between biological sex and cultured gender was not made in Classical India and hence the conceptual differences of the Western discourse are not reflected in and applicable to pre-colonial Indian religious discourses; it therefore seems to be appropriate to speak of sex/gender (Nanda 1999).⁶⁵

On my reading of Vasubandhu, I show that he criticised the Vaibhāṣika attribution of mental activities like perception, gender-based conceptual distinctions, and gendered behaviours to these material *indriyas*. Thus, he severely restricted the function of these material *indriyas* such that they were only related to biological sex, relegating all the mental activities above to consciousness or mind (*vijñāna*) instead. This, I believe, might mark the first emergence of a distinction between conceptually invented gender and material biological sex in the classical South Asian Buddhist tradition. Still, similarity to a European and North American framework does not make Vasubandhu’s view superior or ‘more advanced’ than other views of gender that are found in the classical South Asian Buddhist tradition. Cabezón notes that the European and North American distinction between gender and sex is not without its issues, and various theorists have taken issue

⁶⁵ Scherer, “Variant Dharmas” 255.

with the assumption that biological sex is ‘a given’ while gender is a ‘human construct’.⁶⁶ Indeed, as the American feminist biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling wrote more than two decades ago:

Our bodies are too complex to provide clear-cut answers about sexual difference. The more we look for a simple physical basis for “sex,” the more it becomes clear that “sex” is not a pure physical category. What bodily signals and functions we define as male or female come already entangled in our ideas about gender.⁶⁷

While I do believe that Vasubandhu’s view is sensitive to this issue, I also think that he was only pushed to make this distinction in reaction to the dominant Abhidharma view of his time, which taught that there were material *indriyas* in the body that determine gendered distinctions and behaviours. Thus, the sutta view of gender, which does not posit such a distinction but suggests that our identification of features as gendered is entirely down to irrational mental generations, is equally worthy of note as a theory of gender and gender transcendence.

Finally, a closing note on what I think it means to move ‘towards a Buddhist metaphysics of gender’. In each chapter of my dissertation, I adopt the following approach towards the philosophical study of gender and Buddhism: First, I begin by setting out the foundational metaphysical principles and commitments held by the Buddhist text, sect, or thinker in question. Second, I show how these metaphysical principles and commitments shaped what was possible and required of a theory of gender. The *Sutta Piṭaka* is committed to a philosophical principle of no-self, requiring the formulation of a view of gender which enables the escape (*ativattati*) from a gendered self. The Vaibhāṣikas are committed to a version of metaphysical eliminativism that requires the fundamental existence of any and all entities which are responsible for the possibility and accuracy of our conceptual distinctions. Their belief that gender was one such conceptual

⁶⁶ Cabezón 376.

⁶⁷ Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body* 4.

distinction led them to theorise that our conceptual distinctions about gender had to be based on some real gendered division between sentient beings. Vasubandhu was committed to a specific version of metaphysical eliminativism where only physically and conceptually partless entities could be fundamentally real, resulting in a view that whatever these partite *indriyas* are, they cannot be fundamentally real and cannot collectively be the cause of real gendered distinctions. Only after all this do I articulate the precise view of gender that is advanced by the text, sect, or thinker.

As far as I know, the existing discussions of gender in the field of Buddhist studies either do not perform the first two steps that I detail above, moving straight to discussing the view of gender that is presented, or they provide only a cursory note about one or two of these steps before discussing the view of gender therein. And while this has gifted us a wealth of specialised and succinct information on the different portrayals of gender in classical South Asian Buddhism, I also think that an approach which systematically—if laboriously—lays out how specific metaphysical principles and commitments result in the exact view of gender being advanced has its benefits. Not only does this approach enrich one’s understanding of these theories of gender by situating them within the beliefs and commitments of the text, sect, or thinker in question, it also provides the added security of avoiding the kind of misinterpretations that might arise from isolating our readings of these views of gender from the underlying metaphysical commitments that inform and circumscribe these views.

Chapter 1

Self and *Indriya* in the Pāli Suttas

1.1 What is ‘*indriya*’? What are ‘woman’ and ‘man’?

In *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism*, José Cabezón introduces his survey of the views of gender found in Buddhist texts by distinguishing between presumptive and theoretical discussions of gender:

The texts’ depiction of what it means to be male and female is not always direct and overt. Sometimes it is subtle and oblique. I call these indirect forms of gender rhetoric *presumptive* since they simply presume certain norms without arguing for them. In contrast to presumptive constructions of gender, *theoretical* gender speculation is a systematic, second-order analysis that shows greater self-awareness of gender as a category, on occasion even offering justification for why the norms are what they are.⁶⁸

Following Cabezón’s survey of the Pāli texts, he concludes of all of these selections that they ‘posit sex and gender distinctions presumptively’.⁶⁹ The one Pāli text that is given special acknowledgement is the *Samyoga Sutta*, which discusses something called a ‘woman-*indriya*’ and something called a ‘man-*indriya*’ at length. Nonetheless, Cabezón disqualifies the *Samyoga Sutta* from counting as a theoretical text. In his words, the *Samyoga Sutta* presumes real⁷⁰ ‘gender

⁶⁸ Cabezón 383-4.

⁶⁹ Cabezón 411.

⁷⁰ In Cabezón’s view, it is only in Mahāyāna texts like the *Pitāputrasamāgama Sūtra* where the view is raised that ‘What women and men conceive and imagine, their own gender identities, are misconceptions.’ Thus, it is only in Mahāyāna that Cabezón finds a radical ‘denial of the reality of gender’. However, Cabezón considers even the *Pitāputrasamāgama Sūtra*’s discussion of gender prototheoretical. Even though it argues that binary gender is mentally constructed and ‘lacking in own-nature’, Cabezón claims of the sūtra that ‘it too is complicit in reinforcing gender dimorphism and heterosexual norms’ (389).

dimorphism and ‘does not provide us with a very rich theoretical account of gender’ Cabezón concludes that it is at best ‘prototheoretical’ and only because it attempts to explain ‘gender’s relationship to sexuality’.⁷¹ Thus, Cabezón treats the Pāli texts as presumptive or proto-theoretical, and argues that ‘sophisticated theorizations’ about gender begin to surface only in later Abhidharma literature.⁷²

I disagree. On my view, the *Samyoga Sutta* provides a robust and distinctive theory of gender. It is not presumptive or proto-theoretical; nor is it a ‘rough draft’ to be filled in by some later Abhidharma theory. Rather, the view that the *Samyoga Sutta* is atheoretical comes from reading the *Samyoga Sutta* in isolation from the other suttas with which it is intertextually bound. The *Samyoga Sutta* is a specialised teaching about the gender-related *indriyas*, and it presumes that we already understand what ‘woman-*indriya*’ and ‘man-*indriya*’ mean within the context of the suttas. And this, I will demonstrate, requires our familiarity with two sets of suttas.

First, the *Samyoga Sutta* should be read intertextually with other suttas whose main purpose is to elaborate upon various *indriyas*. For the *Samyoga Sutta* assumes that we understand both what *indriya* means and how compounds beginning with *indriya* should be read—is it ‘*indriya-that-is-woman*’, ‘*indriya-that-resides-in-woman*’, or ‘*indriya-belonging-to-woman*’, etc.? This presupposes that we understand specific features of Pāli linguistics and grammar, and also presumes that we know how *indriya* has been used and characterised in surrounding suttas. It is only by consulting these resources that we can understand what the *Samyoga Sutta* means by ‘*indriya*’, and what about ‘*indriya*’ is left open for interpretation by later Śrāvakayāna Buddhist sects.

⁷¹ Cabezón 388, 394, 389.

⁷² Cabezón 411: ‘By contrast, the Abhidharma literature contains sophisticated theorizations of these topics.’ See also 384: ‘The most developed form of theoretical gender speculation in the Buddhist textual corpus belongs to the Abhidharma.’

Cabezón provides a straightforward meaning of *indriya*, claiming that it has the same definition across the Pāli Suttas, Mahāyāna scriptures, and Abhidharma literature:

... the word faculty (*indriya, dbang po*) is sometimes used to refer to the genitals (*vyañjana, mtshan*), but in other instances to a substance that is diffused throughout the body.⁷³

Interpreting *indriya* as referring either to a body part or real material substance, he proceeds to consistently translate ‘woman-*indriya*’ and ‘man-*indriya*’ as ‘*the female and male faculties (strīpuruṣa--indriya, pho dang mo’i dbang po)*, or more simply *the sex faculties*’.⁷⁴ Indeed, if this is the right definition of *indriya*, then it would be appropriate to associate these *indriyas* with biological sex. And as I will demonstrate in a later chapter, this does seem to be the way that one of the later Abhidharma Buddhist sects chose to interpret and categorise these *indriyas*.

But when interpreting the *Sutta Piṭaka* on its own terms, it is important to note that *indriyas* are never said to be material in nature within the suttas.⁷⁵ Instead, *indriya* is often used in a psychological or functional sense. Moreover, there are considerable linguistic and contextual reasons to resist treating the *Sutta Piṭaka*’s use of ‘*indriya*’ as referring to some one object (organ, faculty, etc.) or metaphysical entity (substance, etc.). In what proceeds, I provide translations from several suttas that show this psychological or functional sense of *indriya*, and argue that as far as the *Sutta Piṭaka* is concerned, what is relevant to being ‘*indriya*’ is our accurate identification of some thing or things as having power over some soteriologically skilful or unskilful behaviour, viewpoint, or outcome.

⁷³ Cabezón 412.

⁷⁴ Cabezón 412.

⁷⁵ Cabezón references the same two texts that I do as the main mentions of the gender-related *indriyas* within the suttas, and in neither of these texts are they specified to be material. There is possibly a case to be made from the *Kummopama Sutta* that sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch *indriyas* are material, but even this is not spelled out explicitly within the text. As I will show in later chapters, the suggestion that the two gender-related *indriyas* are material only arises within the commentarial literature, and it was only one of many competing Abhidharma views about these *indriyas*.

In addition to understanding what *indriya* means, it is also important to understand what is signalled by the terms ‘woman’ (*itthi*) and ‘man’ (*purisa*) as they appear within these compounds. Here, I argue that there is a second set of suttas that is even more crucial to understanding ‘woman-*indriya*’ and ‘man-*indriya*’ in the *Samyoga Sutta*. These are the suttas whose main purpose is to explain our fettering (*samyojana*) to self, and subsequently, to teach us how to escape (*ativattati*) from these fetters. Previous translations of the *Samyoga Sutta* have neglected to mention that this sutta is directly discussing a ‘woman self’ (*itth-attan*) and ‘man self’ (*puris-attan*). Sujato, Thanissaro, and Bodhi translate these as ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’, while Cabezón translates them as ‘femaleness’ and ‘maleness’.⁷⁶

These are certainly less awkward translations than my own, but I choose the more awkward translation because I believe that the mention of *attan* or self is crucial to understanding what is going on in this text. For the mention of *attan* alongside other terms like *samyoga*, *manasi-kāra*, *ajjhattan*, and *bahiddhā* is significant—they constitute the very family of terms that is consistently employed within a specific set of suttas which are dedicated to (1) criticising our internalised metaphysical assumptions about the existence of self, and (2) providing instruction on how we might be able to break free from these internalised assumptions about self. In this chapter, I will explain all but one of these terms (*manasi-kāra* will be set aside for the next chapter). I will conclude that the *Samyoga Sutta*, when read intertextually with the rest of the suttas of its set, is not merely presumptive as Cabezón claims.

⁷⁶ Cabezón 417.

1.2 *Indriyas* over ‘woman’ and ‘man’

My intertextual reading of ‘woman-*indriya*’ and ‘man-*indriya*’ begins with the *Jīvitindriya Sutta*.

Here, the two *indriyas* are mentioned by name alone:

These three, mendicants, are *indriyas*. What are the three?

Woman-*indriya*; man-*indriya*; life-*indriya*.

These, mendicants, are called “three *indriyas*”.⁷⁷

tīṇi imāni, bhikkhave, indriyāni. katamāni tīṇi?

*itth-*indriyaṃ*; puris-*indriyaṃ*; jīvit-*indriyaṃ*.*

imāni kho, bhikkhave, tīṇi indriyāni iti. (SN 48.22)

The *Jīvitindriya Sutta* does not explain the term *indriya*, nor does it elaborate on what ‘woman-*indriya*’ and ‘man-*indriya*’ mean. But we can immediately glean from this sutta that there are other non-gender-related *indriyas*. This verse tells us that there is something called a ‘life-*indriya*’, and the surrounding verses inform us of additional *indriyas* to the above. The preceding *Punabbhava Sutta* (SN 48.21), for example, mentions a set of ‘five *indriyas*’ (*pañcannaṃ indriyānaṃ*): faith-*indriya* (*saddh-*indriyaṃ**), effort-*indriya* (*vīriy-*indriyaṃ**), mindfulness-*indriya* (*sat-*indriyaṃ**), concentration-*indriya* (*samādh-*indriya**), and wisdom-*indriya* (*paññ-*indriyaṃ**). Reading ahead to the *Suddhaka Sutta* (SN 48.25), we learn of a group of six *indriyas* (*cha indriyāni*): sight-*indriya* (*cakkhu-*ndriya**), hearing-*indriya* (*sot-*indriya**), smell-*indriya* (*ghān-*indriya**), taste-*indriya* (*jivh-*indriya**), touch-*indriya* (*kāy-*indriya**), and mind-*indriya* (*man-*indriya**).

We are never explicitly told why those *indriyas* are grouped together, and they do not always appear in these specific groupings in the suttas. Woman-*indriya*, man-*indriya*, and life-*indriya* are presented as a group of three in the *Jīvitindriya Sutta*, but we also see woman-*indriya*

⁷⁷ All Pāli, Sanskrit, and Classical Chinese translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

and man-*indriya* being discussed by the Buddha as a pair in places like the *Samyoga Sutta*. Likewise, the set of six *indriyas* is presented in the *Suddhaka Sutta*, but these are also discussed as a group of five *indriyas* (*pañcimāni... indriyāni*) elsewhere (*MN 43*: ‘sight-*indriya*, hearing-*indriya*, smell-*indriya*, taste-*indriya*, touch-*indriya*’). Often, the Buddha discusses them individually without identifying them as part of any group; and conversely there are instances where a group (e.g., ‘five *indriyas*’) is discussed without ever identifying the members of the group by name.

Theravāda Buddhists surveyed all mentions of the word ‘*indriya*’ in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, listing a total of twenty two different contexts in which the term *indriya* was employed. An early version of this list can be found in the Theravādin *Indriya-vibhaṅga* (‘Analysing the *Indriyas*’):

Twenty-two *indriyas*—sight-*indriya*, hearing-*indriya*, smell-*indriya*, taste-*indriya*, touch-*indriya*, mind-*indriya*, woman-*indriya*, man-*indriya*, life-*indriya*, pleasure-*indriya*, pain-*indriya*, satisfaction-*indriya*, dissatisfaction-*indriya*, indifferent-*indriya*, faith-*indriya*, effort-*indriya*, mindfulness-*indriya*, concentration-*indriya*, wisdom-*indriya*, “I shall know what is unknown”-*indriya*, knowing-*indriya*, one-who-has-known-completely-*indriya*.

Bāvīsati-indriyāni—*cakkhu-ndriyaṃ, sot-indriyaṃ, ghān-indriyaṃ, jivh-indriyaṃ, kāy-indriyaṃ, man-indriyaṃ, itth-indriyaṃ, puris-indriyaṃ, jīvit-indriyaṃ, sukh-indriyaṃ, dukkh-indriyaṃ, somanass-indriyaṃ, domanass-indriyaṃ, upekkh-indriyaṃ, saddh-indriyaṃ, vīriy-indriyaṃ, sat-indriyaṃ, samādh-indriyaṃ, paññ-indriyaṃ, anaññāt-aññassāmīt-indriyaṃ, aññ-indriyaṃ, aññātāv-indriyaṃ. (Vb 5)*

The *Indriya-vibhaṅga* is a particularly useful resource for understanding the *Sutta Piṭaka* on its own terms, for the Theravādin authors of this particular commentary focused strictly on reporting

what was said (and not said⁷⁸) within the suttas. Much like a dictionary entry, the text lists and then defines each of these terms, with each definition appearing to have been directly quoted or summarised from the relevant suttas.⁷⁹ There is no suggestion that this list is exhaustive, nor does it attempt to theorise the metaphysical status of “an *indriya*”—this, too, was reportedly left undeclared (*abyākata*) within the *Sutta Piṭaka*.

Indeed, the etymology of the word ‘*indriya*’ does not particularly invite or necessitate such attempts. It is derived by combining the root *idi* (‘dominant’) with the suffix *-iya*, which forms verbal adjectives (‘being dominant’ or ‘dominating’).⁸⁰ Thus, instead of reading *indriya* as a noun (‘an *indriya*’), we should be reminded that *indriya* is morphologically a verbal adjective (‘the *indriya* king’ or ‘the dominating king’; ‘the king is *indriya*’ or ‘the king is dominating’). Where it is nominalised, we should read it as an adjectival noun (‘that which is dominating’).

We see this corroborated in the linguistic analysis or *nirvacana* provided by the Abhidharma Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu.⁸¹ This method is widely employed throughout the classical South Asian intellectual tradition, and it is sufficient for now to know that anyone who accurately followed this method would have been able to generate a linguistic analysis of *indriya*

⁷⁸ For instance, where the suttas did not provide specific information about a particular *indriya*, the authors acknowledged this by labelling it as *abyākata* (‘undeclared’) instead of offering their own view on the matter.

⁷⁹ While there is no way to confirm if this was in fact the methodology used by the authors of the *Vibhaṅga*, all the definitions in the *Indriya-vibhaṅga* involve mechanically listing terminology that is also found in the respective suttas about these *indriyas*. E.g., the *Samyoga Sutta* elaborates upon woman-*indriya* with terms like ‘*itthi-kutta*’, ‘*itth-ākappa*’, ‘*itth-attan*’, and the *Indriya-vibhaṅga* lists these same terms in their definition of woman-*indriya*.

⁸⁰ Whitney XVII.1213-4.

⁸¹ Ganeri notes that *nirvacana* has usually been interpreted by Indologists as a device for etymological analysis (“Indian Semantic Analysis” 269). Kahrs argues that the *nirvacana* is instead a method for extracting semantic content. I do not take a specific stance on this in my dissertation, and choose to neutrally characterise *nirvacana* as a method of linguistic analysis, leaving it open as to whether it is a method of etymological analysis or a method for semantic content extraction. The *nirvacana* employed by Vasubandhu belongs to a long tradition of linguistic analysis known as *nirukta* or *nirvacana-sātra*. Alongside the linguistic tradition of *vyākaraṇa*, the *nirvacana* is classified as one of the six *vedāṅgas* (‘limbs of the *Vedas*’). Since the *Vedas* were composed in ancient Vedic Sanskrit, the meanings of many of these ancient words became lost or unclear by the classical period. Classical Sanskrit commentators designed the *nirvacana* and *vyākaraṇa* methods with the aim of restoring and extracting meaning from these key religious texts (28). Though there are many surviving works about *vyākaraṇa* (by Pāṇini, Kātyāyana, Patañjali, etc.), Yāska’s *Nirukta* is the only surviving basic text dedicated to the *nirvacana* method, and there are only four surviving commentaries on *nirvacana* (13). Despite the loss of these core texts, the prominence of *nirvacana* is evident from its frequent employment throughout classical Vedic, Jain, and Buddhist commentaries, including this particular commentary by Vasubandhu (xiii).

near-identical to the one below.⁸² This was particularly useful given the constant disagreement that occurred between thinkers, texts, and sects about the meaning of important philosophical terms. Thus, shared *nirvacanas* were frequently used during debate to establish the bare minimum that needs to be true for a word to be appropriately used, giving individual thinkers the freedom to specify any further restrictions and elaborations upon the term as it is used within their work. Importantly, they must also be prepared to defend any restrictions or additions that are not specified by the *nirvacana*, and were frequently called upon to do so by rival thinkers and sects. The following is the linguistic analysis of *indriya*:

‘*Idi*’ means ‘being in a state of highest power’. *Indriyas* mean ‘They are in a state of highest power over some “it”’.

“*idi paramaiśvarye*”. *tasya indanti iti indriyāṇi*. (AKBh II.1)

From this, we are able to understand the etymology of the word *indriya* and how it should be used. We know, for example, that *idi* means ‘dominant’, and here the *nirvacana* explains being dominant as being ‘in a state of highest power’.⁸³ We also learn that when we describe something being dominant, there is always an implied “object” over which this dominance is exerted. Vasubandhu

⁸² To very roughly describe how Vasubandhu derives this analysis: (1) *Nirvacanas* start by identifying the verbal root from which a term originates. This rests on the traditionally accepted view that all Sanskrit nouns originate from verbs. As Yāksa writes, ‘nouns (*nāmāni*) arise from verbs (*ākhyāta*)’ (*Nirukta* I.12: *nāmāny ākhyāta-jānī*). Thus, Vasubandhu begins by providing the root ‘*idi*’ and providing a synonym for it. (2) Depending on whether the word being defined is morphologically transparent or semi-opaque, the commentator may be required to use established rules of phonetic transformation to provide a morphologically transparent form of the word. This requirement of the *nirvacana* is schematised by Visigalli as such: ‘semi-opaque surface word ↔ (phonetic changes) ↔ underlying transparent counterpart’ (120). Since *indriya* is a verbal adjective, Vasubandhu is required to provide the complementary verb form to fulfil this requirement. He derives *indanti* by mechanically applying phonetic and morphological changes, and specifies the plural form of the verb because the term to be defined is also in plural form (*indriyāṇi*). (3) Finally, as *indanti* is a transitive verb, Vasubandhu provides the genitive pronoun ‘*tasya*’ (‘over it’) to acknowledge the presence of an object that receives the action. This is provided in the genitive since verbs meaning ‘rule’ or ‘have authority’ tend to take objects in the genitive (see Whitney 1879, IV.297c).

⁸³ Though the discussion of *indriya* within the suttas clearly describes things being highly powerful over some outcome, we do not find within the suttas an explicit justification for how *indriyas* fit the superlative ‘most powerful’ or ‘highest power’. This becomes a topic of interest in the commentaries of the later Buddhist sects and thinkers. E.g., AKBh II.4, where Vasubandhu responds to an objection that the list of twenty-two *indriyas* is incomplete, for it should include ignorance (*avidyā*), which is powerful over mental impressions (*saṃskāra*); the voice (*vāk*), which is powerful over speech (*vacana*); the hand (*pāṇi*), which is powerful over grasping (*ādāna*) things; the foot (*pāda*), which is powerful over walking (*viharāṇa*); the anus (*pāyu*), which is powerful over excretion (*utsarga*); the genitals (*upastha*), which is powerful over sexual pleasure (*ānanda*). Here, Vasubandhu explains that though it is possible to discuss them as being powerful in some sense, these are not the *highest* powers over these outcomes and thus should not count as *indriyas*.

makes this point by providing the transitive verb *indanti* alongside a placeholder object (‘some “it”’) which he declines in the genitive as ‘over some “it”’ (*tasya*). Thus, we describe something as *indriya* when it is ‘in a state of highest power over some “it”’.

The specification of the genitive is particularly helpful for translating the *indriyas*. Since each of the twenty-two *indriyas* mentioned by the Buddha is presented in compound form (e.g., ‘sight-*indriya*’, ‘woman-*indriya*’, ‘effort-*indriya*’), the grammatical case relation between the two words being compounded is obscured. The provision of the placeholder object in the genitive singular indicates that we can read these compounds as ‘*indriya*-over-sight’, ‘*indriya*-over-woman’, ‘*indriya*-over-effort’, etc. Thus, the full meaning of ‘sight-*indriya*’ is ‘that which is in a state of highest power over sight’; ‘woman-*indriya*’ means ‘that which is in a state of highest power over ‘woman’’⁸⁴; ‘effort-*indriya*’ means ‘that which is in a state of highest power over effort’.

Based on the grammatical role and the linguistic meaning of *indriya*, there are certain unilateral claims that can be made about *all* uses of the term ‘*indriya*’. First, we understand grammatically that all uses of ‘*indriya*’ refer to things *being indriya* (‘in a state of highest power’), and in each case only over a specified domain (‘some “it”’). Thus, anything that fulfils this criterion can be linguistically described as being *indriya*. So although the Buddha only explicitly mentions things that are *indriya* over twenty-two domains, the number of things we can linguistically describe as being *indriya* is limited only by the number of domains we are able to name. We could, for instance, speak of the computer command Ctrl-C as being *indriya* over copying selected texts

⁸⁴ Just like the placeholder ‘it’ in Vasubandhu’s analysis, woman (*itthi*) and man (*purisa*) are declined in the singular and not the plural. Thus, we know that we are not discussing what is most powerful over women (plural). However, it is not clear how we should understand ‘woman’ in the singular. Are we trying to identify what is most powerful over a woman? Are we trying to identify what is most powerful over ‘woman’ as a concept or idea? Are we talking about ‘woman’ as some real thing or property? For now, I translate these domains as ‘woman’ and ‘man’, leaving all these possibilities open.

and files to the clipboard, or the fictional Emperor Palpatine as being *indriya* over the Galactic Empire. All of these are linguistically appropriate uses of the term, and so it is a permitted move for thinkers and sects to offer any of these up as *indriyas* based on the linguistic definition alone.

But should thinkers or sects proceed to provide additional restrictions or elaborations on how the word should be used for their specialised purposes, these need to be either directly defined or explained using further descriptions or examples. Take, for example, the view that the word ‘*indriya*’ unilaterally refers to some one faculty, substance, or organ. As noted above, *indriya* is grammatically a verbal adjective (‘being *indriya*’). And because it is an adjective, it provides us no concrete information about the noun it qualifies (i.e., the *that* which is being *indriya*). Grammatically, we do not know if ‘that’ refers to one thing or several things, nor is it a given that these ‘that’-s share anything in common (e.g., being material, being a substance or organ or faculty) other than their activity of being *indriya*. Thus, what is *indriya* over a given domain may not necessarily be a unified or consistent thing. After all, the ‘*indriya*’ label linguistically applies to whatever exists in a state of highest power over a domain, and it is certainly possible that what we might be tempted to call ‘the thing that is *indriya* over a domain’ (e.g., ‘the effort *indriya*’, ‘the woman *indriya*’) may actually be multiple things working together or alternating with each other to hold highest power over that domain.

Thus, should a particular thinker or sect wish to advance a view where all ‘that’-s consistently refers to some unified thing or entity (e.g., an organ, a faculty, a substance), this move not only has to be declared (e.g., through an explicit definition, through examples that consistently show this to be the case), but it also has to be justified. After all, it is a significant addition to the *nirvacana* to declare that things should only be referred to as ‘*indriya*’ if they are some unified thing or entity. Since this rules out all the cases of multiple things being *indriya* over one domain

even if they fulfil the *nirvacana* requirement, some explanation needs to be given for why that decision was unilaterally made.

Additionally, it is an equally significant move to switch from understanding *indriya* as an adjective (‘being *indriya*’) to adopting *indriya* as a singular noun (‘an *indriya*’). In English, this would be like switching from using the word ‘domineering’ as an adjective (‘being domineering’) to consistently using it as a noun without making any adjustments to its grammatical markers (‘a domineering’). Colloquially, these sorts of shifts in usage happen enough that they are not particularly surprising. But where this occurs for philosophical terms that are important enough to have established *nirvacanas*, we often see thinkers going to great pains to justify these shifts. Indeed, in a later chapter of my dissertation, I show that the Abhidharma Vaibhāṣika sect adopted this particular take on the term *indriya*, and they went to great metaphysical lengths to support this view.

Thus, while the current scholarship on gender *indriyas* unilaterally translates *indriya* in ‘woman-*indriya*’ and ‘man-*indriya*’ as referring to some one material organ or faculty, this is not something that can be assumed from the outset. As Vasubandhu and all the other classical Buddhist philosophers who frequently employ *nirvacanas* would affirm, the only thing that can be immediately assumed upon seeing the very word ‘*indriya*’ in canonical texts like the *Sutta Piṭaka* is the *nirvacana* meaning. Next, any fixed requirements for the Buddhist usage of *indriya* must come from canonical descriptions and examples in the *Sutta Piṭaka*. Finally, anything that is left unsaid within the *Sutta Piṭaka* and is not explicitly disallowed by the *nirvacana* definition is not only open to interpretation by subsequent Śrāvakayāna thinkers and sects, but also open for refutation by opposing Śrāvakayāna thinkers and sects.

So with respect to determining the unilateral meaning of *indriya* within the *Sutta Piṭaka*, the same methodology applies. It should not be assumed from the outset that we know more than the *nirvacana* meaning, and any hard requirements for how the term should be read must be justified not through sectarian commentarial texts—these are not the Buddha’s words and are frequently disputed by opposing Śrāvakayāna sects and thinkers—but through systematically establishing that ‘*indriya*’ is consistently used in that way across the twenty-two different usages of *indriya* in the *Sutta Piṭaka*. Here, should it be the case that the canonical descriptions and examples consistently describe what is *indriya* as some unified organ or faculty, then unilaterally understanding *indriya* as such would be justified not only for the *Sutta Piṭaka*, but for all the Śrāvakayāna Buddhists who take the *Sutta Piṭaka* to be authoritative. But as I will proceed to demonstrate below, the view that *indriya* unilaterally refers to some one organ or faculty is simply not found in the canonical descriptions within the *Sutta Piṭaka*.

Here, I do not have the time to discuss all twenty-two *indriyas*, so I will focus on providing one counterexample from the *Dutiya-vibhaṅga Sutta* before moving on to examining *indriya* over woman and *indriya* over man. This does not rule out that the *Sutta Piṭaka* might proceed to specify in the case of these gender-related uses of *indriya* that they refer to faculties or organs or substances, but it suffices to prove that there is no hard requirement that *indriya* must refer to a unified thing or entity throughout the *Sutta Piṭaka*.⁸⁵ Thus, when we do proceed to read the

⁸⁵ For instance, it might be objected that the sense-related uses of *indriya* (e.g., *indriya* over sight, *indriya* over hearing, *indriya* over touch) do describe unified organs, faculties, or substances in the *Sutta Piṭaka*. It is my own view that the *Sutta Piṭaka* does not explicitly specify these to be organs or faculties either and that these too seem to discuss a series of psychological activities that are either helpful or harmful to soteriological outcomes—e.g., what is *indriya* over sight involves us fixating on signs (*nimitta*) that we have attributed to the objects of perception, and this is a soteriologically harmful outcome that needs to be prevented by reminding ourselves not to engage in this kind of activity. I will show in a later chapter that while the Vaibhāṣika Buddhists insist on treating these as material faculties or substances that are powerful over this kind of outcome, other Abhidharma Buddhists like Buddhadeva and Vasubandhu reject that material substances could be responsible for our psychological fixation on these signs. And even if the Vaibhāṣika Buddhists are right that these sense-related uses of *indriyas* in the *Sutta Piṭaka* must refer to unified material faculties or organs, the *Sutta Piṭaka* does not ever specify that the gender-related uses of *indriya* must share the same meaning as the sense-related uses of *indriya*. I will then show that it was only the Vaibhāṣika Buddhists who believed that these should be classified together; Buddhadeva and Dharmatrāta disagreed. In sum, this is a demonstration of the principle I laid out

extended discussion of *indriya* over woman and *indriya* over man in the *Samyoga Sutta*, we will know not to assume from the outset that these are organs or faculties or substances, and will instead focus on gathering information about these two gender-related uses of *indriya* from the details that are explicitly stated within the text.

With that caveat in mind, I will now discuss the *Dutiya-vibhaṅga Sutta*, where a detailed account is provided of *indriya* over effort. This section of the sutta begins by explaining what ‘effort’ is:

For example, mendicants, when a noble disciple lives their life with unrelenting effort for abandoning unskillful *dhammas* and generating skillful *dhammas*; staying resolute, firmly effortful, and never putting down their duty regarding skillful *dhammas*.

idha, bhikkhave, ariya-sāvako āraddha-vīriyo viharati akusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ pahānāya, kusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ upasampadāya, thāmaṃvā daḍha-parakkamo anikkhitta-dhuro kusalesu dhammesu. (SN 48.10)

Disciples, we are told, have a ‘duty regarding skillful *dhammas*’. Here, *dhammas* refer to basic mental and physical states, and skillful (*kusala*) *dhammas* are those mental and physical states which are conducive to ending suffering.⁸⁶ Thus, the ‘duty regarding skillful *dhammas*’ means that disciples have a duty to generate mental and physical states that are useful for ending suffering while eliminating all frivolous or suffering-causing mental and physical states. This, of course, is a challenging duty to uphold. Since we think or act in ways that are frivolous and unskillful all the time, all it would take is a moment of distraction for these states to resurface and for a practitioner to have neglected their duties in this regard.

above about what was and was not open for debate within the Buddhist tradition. Since it was never explicitly stated that the gender-related *indriyas* were or were not material faculties or organs in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, this was left open to interpretation by later Buddhist thinkers and sects who were free to theorise about and justify these interpretations.

⁸⁶ Unskillful *dhammas* are those states which are conducive to ill-being (*ahita*) and suffering (*dukkha*); skillful *dhammas* are those states which are conducive to well-being (*ahita*) and happiness (*sukha*). See *MN 34*; *AN 2.19*.

This is why the sutta offers us the paradigmatic example of a noble disciple who has successfully fulfilled their duty regarding the skilful *dhammas*. Such examples are meant to be both aspirational and instructive. In an aspirational sense, they tell practitioners that it is in principle possible to achieve this kind of success. In an instructional sense, they (a) describe what this success looks like in practice and (b) explain how it is achieved. With regards to (a), we are told that the noble disciple is characterised by ‘effort’ (*vīriya*). This is defined as a behaviour where a practitioner resolutely and unrelentingly works towards the fulfilment of their duty regarding skilful *dhammas*, and has gone so far as to embrace this duty as a way of life. By this definition, an ‘effortful’ practitioner could never fail in their duty, for they are so fully absorbed in their duty that they would not set it aside for a single moment. Here, what the compound ‘effort-*indriya*’ signals with the word ‘effort’ is a kind of unwavering commitment to putting effort into fulfilling one’s duty. Thus, ‘*indriya* over effort’ might be more helpfully glossed as ‘*indriya* over commitment to effort’. Practitioners who wish to successfully fulfil their duties should seek to emulate this kind of commitment to effort in their own practice.

From here, all that is left is to (b) figure out how to acquire it for oneself. What empowers someone with a capacity for distraction and frivolity to transform into a person so singularly and unwaveringly absorbed in their duty of only generating skilful states? This is the goal of identifying what is *indriya* or most powerful over commitment to effort. If, the thought goes, we can identify this powerful thing and put it to good use, we might be able to unlock this effortful way of life for ourselves. But we will see in the case of commitment to effort that the sutta does not identify some one object or faculty as *indriya* over commitment to effort. Rather, what is *indriya* over commitment to effort is provided in the long list below:

They generate an intention for the non-arising of bad, unskilful *dhammas* that have not yet arisen. They strive for it, initiate effort towards it, put it to mind, and uphold it. They

generate an intention for the removal of bad, unskillful *dharmas* which have arisen in the past. They strive for it, initiate effort towards it, put it to mind, and uphold it. They generate an intention for the arising of skillful *dharmas* which have not yet arisen. They strive for it, initiate effort towards it, put it to mind, and uphold it. They generate an intention for the stability, lack of delusion, increase, abundance, development, and completion of *dhammas*. They strive for it, initiate effort towards it, put it to mind, and uphold it. That, mendicants, is said to be *indriya* over effort.

so anuppannānaṃ pāpakānaṃ akusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ anuppādāya chandaṃ janeti vāyamati vīriyaṃ ārabhati cittaṃ paggaṇhāti padahati; uppannānaṃ pāpakānaṃ akusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ pahānāya chandaṃ janeti vāyamati vīriyaṃ ārabhati cittaṃ paggaṇhāti padahati; anuppannānaṃ kusalānaṃ uppannānaṃ kusalānaṃ dhammānaṃ ṭhitiyā asamosāya bhiyyobhāvāya vepullāya bhāvanāya pāripūriyā chandaṃ janeti vāyamati vīriyaṃ ārabhati cittaṃ paggaṇhāti padahati—dhammānaṃ uppādāya chandaṃ janeti vāyamati vīriyaṃ ārabhati cittaṃ paggaṇhāti padahati; idaṃ vuccati, bhikkhave, vīriy-indriyaṃ. (SN 48.10)

We see from this extensive list that there is no one thing that we can acquire or manipulate in order to become effortful. Indeed, the practitioner's duty regarding the *dhammas* is analysed to consist of four distinct and ongoing aims: (1) preventing the future arising of unskillful *dhammas*, (2) weeding out unskillful *dhammas* that have previously arisen, (3) generating new skillful *dhammas*, and (4) increasing, developing, and completing the skillful *dhammas*. The practitioner must then engage in five activities towards each aim: (1) setting intentions towards the aim, (2) striving towards the fulfilment of the aim, (3) initiating tasks to realise the aim, (4) putting these tasks to mind, and (5) 'upholding' or continuing to keep them in mind. Thus, what is *indriya* over effort actually refers to a list of twenty distinct activities.

Each of these twenty activities of intending, striving, upholding, etc., is necessary but insufficient for enabling the effortful way of life defined earlier. Without setting the right intentions, I might still be effortful in some sense, but that effort would be frivolous at best and unskilful at worst; without putting a task to mind and keeping it there, I might end up forgetting or abandoning any initial intentions I had of fulfilling my duty. Moreover, all four of these mental processes need to occur in tandem, each directed towards one aspect of the practitioner's duty. If I only focus on generating skilful *dhammas* and forget to weed out all the unskilful *dhammas*, or if I only work on weeding out the existing unskilful *dhammas* and forget to work on preventing the arising of more unskilful *dhammas*, then I am still neglecting crucial aspects of my duty. Thus, seeking to attain effort is no simple task—the practitioner must ensure that they are constantly intending, aspiring, and acting on every aspect of their duties. And since it is only when these twenty activities are fully practised that one is able to have 'effort' in the sense defined above, the whole list of activities is collectively credited as being *indriya*, or being in a position of highest power over effort.

As a result, *indriya* over the commitment to effort presents a case where the *Sutta Piṭaka* is not committed to identifying some one unified thing or entity as what is *indriya* over a domain. And when we see the definitions provided in the *Indriya-vibhaṅga* for each of the twenty-two *indriyas*, at least seventeen of them involve stating a long list of things as *indriya* over that domain. Particularly for *indriya* over mind, the *Indriya-vibhaṅga* surveys the many instances where being *indriya* over mind is discussed and explains that as few as one kind (*eka-vidha*) of *indriya* over mind or as many as ten kinds (*dasa-vidha*) of *indriya* over mind are provided within the suttas (*Vb* 5). And in the case of *indriya* over 'woman' and *indriya* over 'man', the *Indriya-vibhaṅga* acknowledges that same kind of multiplicity when glossing the terms:

There, what is ‘woman-*indriya*’? Whatever is most powerful over ‘woman’⁸⁷—[where ‘whatever is most powerful’ could be] shape belonging to ‘woman’, sign belonging to ‘woman’, behaviour belonging to ‘woman’, attire belonging to ‘woman’, self belonging to ‘woman’, states belonging to ‘woman’—is called “woman-*indriya*”.

tattha katamaṃ itth-indriyaṃ? yaṃ itthiyā itthi-liṅgaṃ itthi-nimittaṃ itthi-kuttaṃ itth-ākappa itth-attaṃ itthi-bhāvo—idaṃ vuccati “itth-indriyaṃ”.

There, what is ‘man-*indriya*’? Whatever is most powerful over ‘man’—[where ‘whatever is most powerful’ could be] shape belonging to ‘man’, sign belonging to ‘man’, behaviour belonging to ‘man’, attire belonging to ‘man’, self belonging to ‘man’, states belonging to ‘man’—is called “man-*indriya*”.

yattha katamaṃ puris-indriyaṃ? yaṃ purisassa purisa-liṅgaṃ purisa-nimittaṃ purisa-kuttaṃ puris-ākappa puris-attaṃ purisa-bhāvo—idaṃ vuccati “puris-indriyaṃ”. (Vb 5)

Here, we see an earlier Theravādin version of Vasubandhu’s point that compounds like ‘woman-*indriya*’ should be understood as ‘most powerful over “woman”’. Moreover, we see that a bunch of things are listed as collectively fulfilling this role. Just like *indriya* over commitment to effort, what is *indriya* over ‘woman’ does not appear to be a single consistent entity, but refers to *whatever* is most powerful over ‘woman’. Here, the listed options for *indriya* over ‘woman’ include shape belonging to ‘woman’, sign belonging to ‘woman’, behaviour belonging to ‘woman’, attire belonging to ‘woman’, self belonging to ‘woman’, states belonging to ‘woman’. The Theravādin authors leave it grammatically open for ‘whatever is most powerful’ to refer to just one or some or all of these options, indicating that this detail was left open and undeclared (*abyākata*) within the suttas. Thus, the Theravādin authors acknowledge multiplicity and variability in the suttas’

⁸⁷ Here, ‘over women’ might appear more natural, but just like the placeholder *tasya* in Vasubandhu’s analysis, *itthi* here is declined by the Theravādin commentators in the genitive singular (*itthiyā*)—so, over ‘woman’. The reason for this will be elaborated upon later in this chapter.

account of what *indriya* over ‘woman’ and what *indriya* over ‘man’ mean, implying that what is *indriya* is not some one thing or entity, but rather multiple things.

There are several things that are left open by this gloss. First, we do not yet understand how the many things listed in the *Indriya-vibhaṅga* definition are supposed to be *indriya* or most powerful over ‘woman’ or ‘man’, nor do we understand what is meant by ‘woman’ and ‘man’ here. Since my focus in this chapter is on parsing and explaining the meaning of the compounds themselves (‘*indriya* over woman’; ‘*indriya* over man’), I will set aside how the things listed are supposed to be powerful over gender, which will be the topic of my subsequent chapter.

Second, with regards to ‘woman’ and ‘man’, we do know from these being provided to us in the singular that they should not be translated as ‘*indriya* over women’ or ‘*indriya* over men’. But even when narrowed down to the singular, it is unclear whether this should be translated with an indefinite article (e.g., ‘a woman’) or without it (e.g., ‘woman’). Additionally, just as ‘effort’ was further clarified to specifically be about commitment to putting effort into one’s duty to only generate skilful *dhammas*, more information is required for us to understand what about a woman or ‘woman’ is being picked out by this domain. Without this information, it is also difficult to figure out how we should interpret what is listed as being *indriya* over ‘man’ and ‘woman’—what kind of things are they, and in what sense are they most powerful over these domains?

Third, we do not know yet what attitude we are supposed to hold towards these gender-related *indriyas*. In the example of *indriya* over effort, we see an example where *indriyas* are soteriologically helpful to the practitioner. There, the activities that are most powerful over effort are identified so that practitioners may emulate them and make progress towards generating skilful *dhammas*. But when the Theravādin authors of the *Indriya-vibhaṅga* move from defining the *indriyas* to distinguishing them from a soteriological perspective, we see this is not true of all the

indriyas on the list. The commentators note that while some *indriyas* are skilful (*kusala*) and helpful (*saraṇa*), most *indriyas* are powerful over soteriologically unhelpful outcomes. These *indriyas* are unskilful (*akusala*) and harmful (*araṇa*),⁸⁸ and it is the practitioner’s job to work on controlling⁸⁹ or eliminating them. Whether the gender-related *indriyas* are soteriologically helpful or harmful remains open.

1.3 Viewing reality through self

The *Samyoga Sutta* provides answers to all of the questions raised above. When it comes to ‘woman’ and ‘man’, the *Samyoga Sutta* specifies that ‘woman’ refers to ‘woman self’ (*itth-attan*) and ‘man’ refers to ‘man self’ (*puris-attan*), and that the gender-related *indriyas* are whatever is most powerful over our ‘fettering’ (*saṃyoga*) to these gendered selves. We are not given definitions of these two gendered selves here, but the term ‘*attan*’ or ‘self’ would be immediately recognisable due to the extensive discussions of it throughout the suttas. In this section, I will focus on explaining the significance of self in the suttas in order that we may have sufficient context for understanding the arguments in the *Samyoga Sutta*.

Within the suttas, self is usually raised in the context of mental self-identification, where individuals observe things and identify them in the following order. First, the individual identifies

⁸⁸ There are also indefinite (*abyākata*) *indriyas*, which are neither skilful or unskilful. See *Vb 5*: ‘Of the twenty two *indriyas*, how many are skilful, how many are unskilful, how many are indefinite? ... How many are helpful; how many are harmful?’ (*bāvīsatiṇaṃ indriyānaṃ kati kusalā, kati akusalā, kati abyākata... kati saraṇā, kati araṇā?*). We might, for instance, consider *indriya* over sight to be indefinite, since what is powerful over sight can be responsible for both unskilful and skilful outcomes (see next n.).

⁸⁹ We see an example in the *Kummopama Sutta*, where *indriya* over sight is discussed: ‘Therefore, mendicants, regarding [the five] *indriyas*: you must live with the doorway guarded. Having seen a material form with the eyes, you must not grasp features nor details. Because if *indriya* over sight dwells unrestrained, dhammas that are desirous, aversive, unskilful, and unmeritorious would stream out in abundance. For this reason, you must proceed with restraint, you must protect that which is *indriya* over sight, you must achieve restraint over that which is *indriya* over sight.’ (*tasmātiha, bhikkhave, indriyesu gutta-dvārā viharatha. cakkhunā rūpaṃ disvā mā nimitta-ggāhino ahuvattha, mā anubyañjana-ggāhino. yatvādhikaraṇaṃ eṇaṃ cakkhūndriyaṃ asaṃvutaṃ viharantaṃ abhijjhā-domanassā pāpakā akusalā dhammā anvāssaveyyuṃ, tassa saṃvarāya paṭipajjatha, rakkhatha cakkhūndriyaṃ, cakkhūndriye saṃvaraṃ āpajjatha.*)

things as mine ('this is mine'), progresses to framing their identity around it ('I am this'), and then reifies their self ('this is my self'). We see an example of this in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*:

They observe material form and think, "this is mine, I am this, this is my self"; They observe sensation and think, "this is mine, I am this, this is my self". They observe cognitions and think, "this is mine, I am this, this is my self". They observe mental impressions and think, "this is mine, I am this, this is my self". They observe whatever is seen, heard, thought, known, attained, sought, and explored by the mind and think: "This is mine, I am this, this is my self".

rūpaṃ 'etaṃ mama, eso 'ham asmi, eso me attā'ti samanupassati; vedanaṃ 'etaṃ mama, eso 'ham asmi, eso me attā'ti samanupassati; saññaṃ 'etaṃ mama, eso 'ham asmi, eso me attā'ti samanupassati; saṅkhāre 'etaṃ mama, eso 'ham asmi, eso me attā'ti samanupassati; yampi taṃ diṭṭhaṃ suttaṃ mutaṃ viññātaṃ pattaṃ pariyesitaṃ, anuvicariṭaṃ manasā tampi 'etaṃ mama, eso 'ham asmi, eso me attā'ti samanupassati.

(MN 22)

Here, self-identification involves two activities which occur in tandem with each other. The individual who engages in self-identification is (a) observing the arising of material form, sensation, cognition, etc., while (b) judging them to be 'mine', 'me', 'my self'. For instance, instead of simply thinking 'hand' when I observe that form, I reflexively judge it to be 'my hand'; instead of simply thinking 'pain' when I detect that sensation, I reflexively judge it to be 'my pain', 'I am hurt', etc. The progression from simple observation ('this pain') to judgement ('my pain') requires the idea of an 'I' to which things are capable of belonging. And this, the suttas claim, is grounded in a deeply ingrained conviction in 'self' and 'belonging to self' as apt frameworks for judging what we observe. We see this mindset spelled out in the *Sabbāsava Sutta*:

It may either be that the view ‘It is precisely through self that I perceive things belonging to self’ arises as true and real; or it may be that the view ‘It is precisely through self that I perceive things not belonging to self’ arises as true and real.

‘attanā ‘va attānaṃ sañjānāmi’ iti vā assa saccato thetato diṭṭhi uppajjati; ‘attanā ‘va anattānaṃ sañjānāmi’ iti vā assa saccato thetato diṭṭhi uppajjati. (MN 2)

Through this conviction in ‘self’ and ‘belonging to self’, we are moved to relate all that we observe back to self. Instead of simply observing a hand or a painful sensation, I am moved to decide whether this hand belongs to my self or not, whether this pain belongs to my self or not. And this in turn informs the attitude that we hold towards the presence of a painful hand. Were there simply a perception of a painful hand, for example, our focus would most likely be drawn to the presence of pain, the badness of pain, and the need to eliminate it. But since this painful hand is perceived through self, it immediately feels like there is a meaningful difference between *my hand* being in pain and *someone else’s* hand being in pain. And it seems only fitting that I might find the pain incredibly urgent when it is my hand, but also find it important when it is someone else’s pain to pause and consider how it might affect or inconvenience me before deciding whether to help them out.

Thus, conviction in ‘self’ and ‘belonging to self’ does not only affect how we perceive the world, but affects how we judge what we perceive and how we deliberate on what we judge. And this, the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* argues, can only be deeply unhealthy for us. With regards to our psychological conviction in self, the passage makes the following claim:

“Mendicants, you may internalise that view of self which, if you appropriated that view of self, would not give rise to disturbance, distress, suffering, lamentation, and sorrow. But do you observe a view of self which, if you internalised that view of self, would not give rise to disturbance, distress, suffering, lamentation, and sorrow?”

“No, venerable one.”

“Good, mendicants. I too do not observe a view of self which, if I internalised that view of self, would not give rise to disturbance, anxiety, suffering, lamentation, and sorrow.”

taṃ, bhikkhave, atta-vād-upādānaṃ upādiyetha, yaṃsa atta-vād-upādānaṃ upādiyato na uppajjeyyūṃ soka-parideva-dukkha-domanass-upāyāsā. passatha no tumhe, bhikkhave, taṃ atta-vād-upādānaṃ yaṃsa atta-vād-upādānaṃ upādiyato na uppajjeyyūṃ soka-parideva-dukkha-domanass-upāyāsā”

“no hetam, bhante”.

“sādhu, bhikkhave. ahampi kho taṃ, bhikkhave, atta-vād-upādānaṃ na samanupassāmi yaṃsa atta-vād-upādānaṃ upādiyato na uppajjeyyūṃ soka-parideva-dukkha-domanass-upāyāsā.” (MN 22)

Here, the verb *upādiyati* or ‘appropriate’ refers to the psychological clinging, grasping, and internalising of self. And where this psychological self is concerned, the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* claims that the specifics of what we appropriate as self are irrelevant, for any kind of internalised self leads us to perceive the world through self. This sutta does not explain exactly how perceiving through self is responsible for all this disturbance, anxiety, suffering, lamentation, and sorrow, but the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* offers an explanation for this that thematises agency. The following statement is about material form, but it should be noted that this same statement is repeated verbatim for sensations, cognitions, mental impressions, and consciousness (*viññāṇa*):

Material form, mendicants, is not self. If it were indeed the case that this material form was self, this material form would not lead to distress, for you could cause it to obtain of material form that “my material form must be like this, my material form must not be like this.” But because material form is not self, mendicants, material form leads to distress, for you could not cause it to obtain of material form that “my material form must be like this, my material form must not be like this.”

yasmā ca kho, bhikkhave, rūpaṃ anattā, tasmā rūpaṃ ābādhāya saṃvattati, na ca labbhati rūpe: ‘evaṃ me rūpaṃ hotu, evaṃ me rūpaṃ mā ahosī’ ti. rūpaṃ, bhikkhave, anattā. rūpaṃ ca hi idaṃ, bhikkhave, attā abhaviṣṣa, na yidaṃ rūpaṃ ābādhāya saṃvatteyya, labbhettha ca rūpe: ‘evaṃ me rūpaṃ hotu, evaṃ me rūpaṃ mā ahosi’ iti. (SN 22)

Viewing the world through self, I take material form, sensations, cognitions, etc., to all be parts of my self. But the sutta counters that these things are only worthy of being internalised as self if we are capable of causing them to be exactly how we wish for them to be. If this feels like an unreasonable criterion, then that is exactly the point that the sutta is trying to make. For the sutta argues that this lofty expectation is exactly what is being assumed when I deliberate and act through self. When I interact with the world in this way, I adopt the perspective of an agential self who wishes, wills, and acts upon the rest of the world. This self is constantly thinking about its future as a self—it wishes to obtain what is pleasant and beneficial to it while avoiding what is unpleasant and harmful to it, and is convinced of its ability to seize control of itself and its environment in order to secure this outcome. Internalising material form, sensations, cognitions, etc., as being my very self, I think, ‘All this is me, thus I will ensure that they are how I wish them to be.’ And believing these parts of my self to be under my control, I think, ‘If I direct my body and mind to take the appropriate precautions and do all the right things, they will be kept free from harm and I will persist and flourish.’

However, this desire to maintain control over my self and conviction in my ability to do so only sets me up for failure. For these things that I have taken to be part of my self are not things that I am capable of controlling:⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Again, I provide the excerpt about material form, but it should be understood that these claims are repeated word-for-word with regards to sensations, cognitions, mental impressions, and consciousness.

They do not really understand material form which is impermanent as “impermanent material form”... They do not really understand material form which is suffering as “suffering material form”... They do not really understand material form which is not self as “not-self material form”... They do not really understand material form which is conditioned as “conditioned material form”... They do not really understand that material form will cease to exist.

so aniccaṃ rūpaṃ ‘aniccaṃ rūpan’ti yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti... dukkhaṃ rūpaṃ ‘dukkhaṃ rūpan’ti yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti... anattaṃ rūpaṃ ‘anattā rūpan’ti yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti... saṅkhataṃ rūpaṃ ‘saṅkhataṃ rūpan’ti yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti... ‘rūpaṃ vibhavissati’ iti yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti. (SN 22)

We are as much agents capable of acting as we are patients capable of being acted upon, and this means that we are constantly faced with proof of our vulnerability and lack of control. While we might imagine that these material forms are part of our selves and that we are capable of controlling what happens to them, the truth is that all these material forms are conditioned by causes that are out of our control. And the fact that they are conditioned by causes means that anything affecting their causes—which are also conditioned—will affect them. For example, when I make sure to do all the right exercises and my body experiences sustained health, it certainly feels like I have successfully controlled my body through exercise. But the nature of material form as conditioned means that genetic, environmental, and social factors are far more responsible for my continued health than my choice to exercise. Ignoring how bodily health is overwhelmingly determined by factors outside my control, the agential self drives me to view my continued bodily health as proof of my control over the state of my body.

This also means that when genetic, environmental, or social factors eventually kick in and our bodies are beset by illness or disability, this illusion of control shatters. When we are

accustomed to behaving as though we are only agents and never patients, instances like these serve as painful reminders of how limited we are in our ability to keep our selves intact. We realise that we were never as in control as we believed ourselves to be, that we are far more subject to our conditions than we ever wished to acknowledge, and this sudden revelation drives us to despair. This only gets worse when one considers their complete powerlessness over the inevitability of death:

They think, “I am definitely going to be thoroughly annihilated! I am going to be thoroughly destroyed! I am not going to exist!” They grieve, they are distressed, they lament. Beating their breast, they cry and fall into confusion. In this way, mendicants, even though what is internal to self does not exist, they become anxious.

tassa evaṃ hoti: ‘ucchijjissāmi nāma ‘ssu, vinassissāmi nāma ‘ssu, na ‘ssu nāma bhavissāmi iti. so socati kilamati paridevati urattāḷiṃ kandati sammohaṃ āpajjati. evaṃ kho, bhikkhu, ajjhataṃ asati paritassanā hoti iti. (MN 22)

Moreover, instead of coming to terms with all the ways in which we are subject to factors outside our control, our internalised agential self causes us to deeply resent being acted upon. It continues to inflate its own sense of agency, taking credit whenever things go well and feeling aggrieved whenever its sense of control is undermined. And all this occurs while the spectre of environmental instability, deterioration, and death looms overhead, reminding us of how vulnerable we are to factors outside of our control. This only makes us more anxious, and we respond by trying to assert as much control as we can over our environment. We look at the things that we consider to not be self and treat them as things to own or otherwise control: If I accumulate all these possessions, I will be secure if and when these threats arrive; if I seize control of my environment, I will have the power to fend these threats off. But this falls into the same faults as before, driving us into a constant, unwinnable, and anxiety-inducing struggle for control:

It indeed used to be mine, then it was certainly not mine anymore. Perhaps it could indeed be mine, then I would certainly no longer need to obtain it. They grieve, they are distressed, they lament. Beating their breast, they cry and fall into confusion. In this way, mendicants, even though what is external [to self] does not exist, they become anxious.

'ahu vata me, taṃ vata me natthi; siyā vata me, taṃ vata ahaṃ na labhāmī'ti. so socati kilamati paridevati urattāḷiṃ kandati sammohaṃ āpajjati. evaṃ kho, bhikkhu, bahiddhā asati paritassanā hotī'ti. (MN 22)

When we internalise self on a psychological level, what we are actually doing is internalising a series of metaphysical beliefs and distinctions. The psychological internalisation of self filters our experience of reality, causing self and the interests of self to shape our organisation of reality. Prioritising a distinction between 'self' and 'not-self', we proceed to classify the constituents of reality into 'what is internal to self' (*ajjhattan*) and 'what is external [to self]' (*bahiddhā*). Convinced that there is a fundamental and relevant difference between things of the former and latter category, we find it acceptable and reasonable to adopt different attitudes towards things depending on which category we believe they belong to. Believing in our own agency, we see both 'what is internal to self' and 'what is external [to self]' as existing in ways that make us capable of owning or controlling them.

Whether we are aware of it or not, these deeply held metaphysical assumptions are at work within us, determining what we think is reasonable to desire, realistic to expect, and possible to obtain.⁹¹ And if it were the case that these metaphysical assumptions held up to reality, then our desires would indeed be reasonable, our expectations would indeed be realistic, and our intended outcomes would indeed be attainable. But when we do proceed to try to realise these outcomes, it

⁹¹ As Neiman writes about how metaphysics circumscribes our lives: it 'determine[s], among other things, what you hold to be self-evident and what you hold to be possible; what you think has substance and what you can afford to ignore' (25).

feels like we cannot go through the world without our desires, expectations, and sense of agency being thwarted and undermined at every turn.⁹² And this, the suttas argue, is a result of the mismatch between our metaphysical assumptions and reality as it actually is.

Take the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*'s claim that when we view the world through self, we 'do not really understand material form'. The adverb I translate as 'really' is *yathā-bhūtam*, which has a distinctly metaphysical emphasis. *Bhūta* is a nominalised past passive participle of the verb *bhavati* ('it becomes'), meaning 'what has become'. It specifies entities which have arisen through becoming,⁹³ and are thus subject to change, deterioration, and eventual annihilation. And because the suttas hold the view that all entities exist in this way, *bhūta* in the suttas becomes synonymous with 'what is real', 'what exists', 'what is true'.⁹⁴ Put together with the preposition *yathā*, it becomes an indeclinable adverb meaning 'in accordance with what is real or true'.⁹⁵ Thus, when the sutta claims that viewing the world through self is why we 'do not really understand material form', the charge is not just that our understanding is incomplete or inadequate, but that we have failed to understand material form as it really is, something that arose through becoming, subject to change, deterioration, and eventual annihilation.

Indeed, when reality is considered as it truly is, the distinction between 'self' and 'not-self', 'internal' or 'external' to self, is not of any particular importance or relevance. For all the constituents of reality exist in the exact same way—they are all mutually conditioned, mutually

⁹² And this experience of constantly desiring more than we ever end up receiving, of constantly struggling and failing to feel in control, is felt and processed as distress, dread, anxiety, and suffering. Thus, in trying to explain the psychology of suffering, the suttas begin to engage in metaphysics.

⁹³ Rather than just being or existing, which is sometimes specified using the verb *atthi* instead. Here, some parallels may be drawn with the way that Plato distinguishes between *γίγνεσθαι* and *εἶναι*.

⁹⁴ C.f. Cox, *Disputed Dharmas* 549: 'In the case of Buddhism, this analysis reveals the structure of the conditioning interconnections that underlie the gross, composite objects of ordinary experience, interconnections that are not arbitrary, but are considered to be "true" or, in Buddhist parlance, to represent the "way things really are" (*yathābhūtam*).'

⁹⁵ Or as Ganeri explains the meaning of *yathā-bhūtam*, 'Knowledge is truth-entailing—it is of things as they really are (*yathā-bhūtam*)' (*Attention, Not Self* 152).

dependent, and subject to change, deterioration, and annihilation. When I use my idea of ‘self’ and ‘not-self’ to distinguish between what is internal and what is external to self, I am artificially isolating these ‘internal’ things from all of the ‘external’ things that determine nearly everything about their arising and changing and deteriorating and eventual annihilation. On this view, investing in a differentiation between things that are ‘internal’ and ‘external’ to self is just as futile as investing in a differentiation between water that belongs to the Indian Ocean and water that belongs to the Southern Ocean. Scientifically, there is only an ‘interconnected circulation system’ of water, and isolating some of that water as ‘Indian Ocean water’ requires me to ignore how that isolated portion of water flows and changes in mutual dependence with the rest of the water.⁹⁶ Likewise, there are only conditioned things which arise, change, and fall in mutual dependence with each other. Taking special interest in what we deem as ‘internal’, believing that we can control it and protect it from what we see as ‘external’—all of it becomes unwarranted once we not just understand, but also internalise and act in accordance with reality.

What does this mean for the internalised metaphysical categories of ‘self’ (*attan*), ‘internal to self’ (*ajjhattan*), and ‘belonging to self’ (*attaniya*) on the one hand, and ‘not-self’ (*anattan*), ‘external [to self]’ (*bahiddhā*), and ‘not belonging to self’ (*anattaniya*) on the other? There is, the suttas argue above, nothing in reality that is worthy of being included in any of the former categories. And when we abandon our current state of viewing reality ‘through self’ (*MN 2: attanā*) in favour of viewing reality ‘through insight which accords with what is real and true’ (*MN 22:*

⁹⁶ Indeed, the very first principle in the United Nations’ Ocean Literacy Toolkit states that ‘The Earth has one big ocean with many features.’ As Santoro et al. explain the principle: ‘Though the five ocean basins (Atlantic, Pacific, Arctic, Southern, and Indian) can be considered as separate bodies, they are interconnected as one global ocean. This can be easily seen in looking at a map of the world from the South Pole. The connections among the ocean basins allow seawater, matter, and organisms to move from one basin to another. Throughout the global ocean, there is one interconnected circulation system that is powered by winds, tides, the force of the Earth’s rotation, the Sun, and water density differences. This circulation system creates a moving conveyor belt of linked surface and deep water currents.’ (30)

yathā-bhūtaṃ sammappaññāya), we come to recognise that every constituent of reality (*dhamma*) would more appropriately fall into the latter set of categories:

They observe material form and think, “this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self”.

They observe sensation and think, “this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self”. They

observe cognitions and think, “this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self”. They

observe mental impressions and think, “this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self”.

They observe whatever is seen, heard, thought, known, attained, sought, and explored by the mind and think: “this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self”.

rūpaṃ ‘na etaṃ mama, na eso ‘ham asmi, na meso attā’ti samanupassati; vedanaṃ ‘na etaṃ mama, na eso ‘ham asmi, na meso attā’ti samanupassati; saññaṃ ‘na etaṃ mama, na eso ‘ham asmi, na meso attā’ti samanupassati; saṅkhāre ‘na etaṃ mama, na eso ‘ham asmi, na meso attā’ti samanupassati; yampi taṃ diṭṭhaṃ suttaṃ mutaṃ viññātaṃ pattaṃ pariyesiṭaṃ, anuvicariṭaṃ manasā, tampi ‘na etaṃ mama, na eso ‘ham asmi, na meso attā’ti samanupassati. (MN 22)

And should they be successful in this endeavour, the *Paṭhamavagga* claims:

There is no instance nor possibility that a person, having become accomplished in view, would adopt any *dhamma* as self.

aṭṭhānaṃ etaṃ, bhikkhave, anavakāso yaṃ diṭṭhi-sampanno puggalo kañci dhammaṃ attato upagaccheyya. (AN 1.270)

Since the suttas recommend that everything should belong to the latter categories and nothing should belong to the former categories, our internalised metaphysical concepts of ‘self’, ‘internal to self’, and ‘belonging to self’ end up containing and referring to nothing. As we saw previously in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, this progresses to the sutta’s metaphysical claim that ‘internal to self’ does not exist (*ajjhataṃ asanta*). And the sutta makes the same conclusions about the metaphysical status of ‘self’ and ‘belonging to self’:

“Were ‘self’ to exist, would there be ‘belonging to self’ for me?”

“Yes, venerable one.”

“Were ‘belonging to self’ to exist, would there be ‘self’ for me?”

“Yes, venerable one.”

“But, mendicants, ‘self’ and ‘belonging to self’ are not known to be true or real.”

“attani vā, bhikkhave, sati ‘attaniyaṃ me’ti assā”ti?

“evaṃ, bhante”.

“attaniye vā, bhikkhave, sati ‘attā me’ti assā”ti?

“evaṃ, bhante”.

“attani ca, bhikkhave, attaniye ca saccato thetato anupalabbhamāne.” (MN 22)

Having eliminated ‘self’, ‘internal to self’, and ‘belonging to self’ as metaphysical categories, there remains little sense in continuing to use ‘not-self’, ‘external [to self]’, and ‘belonging to self’ as opposing categories. Thus, the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* proceeds to claim that ‘external [to self]’ does not exist as well (*bahiddhā asanta*), and we will see that the categories of ‘not-self’ and ‘not belonging to self’ are gradually phased out at the culmination of this discussion. Instead of judging the constituents of reality solely in reference to the imputed self and centering our observations on whether they are or are not this self, we progress to understanding the constituents of reality on their own terms:

They really understand material form which is impermanent as “impermanent material form”... They really understand material form which is suffering as “suffering material form”... They really understand material form which is not self as “not-self material form”... They really understand material form which is conditioned as “conditioned material form”... They really understand that material form will cease to exist.

so aniccaṃ rūpaṃ ‘aniccaṃ rūpaṃ’ti yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti... dukkhaṃ rūpaṃ ‘dukkhaṃ rūpaṃ’ti yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti... anattaṃ rūpaṃ ‘anattā rūpaṃ’ti

*yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti... raṅkhataṃ rūpaṃ 'saṅkhataṃ rūpan'ti yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti...
'rūpaṃ vibhavissati' iti yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti. (SN 22)*

1.4 Escaping the gendered self

Thus, when the *Samyoga Sutta* specifies that ‘woman’ refers to ‘woman self’ (*itth-attan*) and ‘man self’ (*puris-attan*), we immediately understand the same critique to apply here. After all, the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* clearly states that any and all views of self must be abandoned. So whatever these gendered selves are that we have internalised on a psychological level, we know they are not ‘real or true’. And we also know that viewing the world through these gendered selves prevents us from understanding in accordance with what is metaphysically real and true and subsequently from being free from suffering. This point is emphasised through the very name of the *Samyoga Sutta* (*‘Sutta on Fettering’*), which comes from the declaration that begins the sutta:

Mendicants, I am going to teach you a formulation of the teaching on fettering (*samyoga*)
and unfettering (*visamyoga*).

samyoga-visamyogaṃ vo, bhikkhave, dhamma-pariyāyaṃ desessāmi. (AN 7)

Here, the specification that this discussion of gender is just one formulation (*pariyāya*)⁹⁷ of the teaching of fettering and unfettering is significant. It identifies the *Samyoga Sutta* as a text that belongs to a larger set of texts that centre around fettering and unfettering. And it also suggests that the same basic formula that is used for all suttas in this set will be applied to the specific topic of gendered selves. Moreover, ‘fettering and unfettering’ (*samyoga-visamyoga*) is the very terminology used in suttas about the construction and deconstruction of self. *Samyoga* or ‘fettering’ indicates *diṭṭhi-samyojana* (‘fettering to view’), where *diṭṭhi* or ‘view’ indicates

⁹⁷ See Shulman 149-99 for his explanation of the formula and *dhamma-pariyāya*, as well as Anālayo, “Visions of the Buddha.”

sakkāya-diṭṭhi ('self-identification view'), one of the three kinds of fetterings.⁹⁸ *Sakkāya-diṭṭhi* or the 'self-identification view' is the very psychological process of self-identification described above, and *diṭṭhi-samyojana* or 'fettering to view' accounts for why self-identification happens and why we are so deeply convinced that this way of thinking is accurate and appropriate.

Thus, we can expect the *Samyoga Sutta* to present some gender-specific account of what being fettered to self-identification looks like and how this fettering causes distinctions like self and not self, internal and external to self, etc., to 'arise [within us] as genuine fact' (*MN 2: channaṃ... diṭṭhi uppajjati*). Indeed, the sutta mentions 'internal to self' (*ajjhattan*) and 'external [to self]' (*bāhiddha*) as viewpoints taken by the person who differentiates between 'woman self' and 'man self'. Here, it is only through reading the text intertextually that we have the appropriate context to recognise *ajjhattan* and *bāhiddha* as inaccurate metaphysical categories that we impose upon reality.

Finally, the mention of unfettering (*visamyoga*) is of particular interest, for we see reflected here a conviction that it is possible for us to escape the hold that self-identification—including gendered self-identification—has over our perceptions, judgements, and actions, and indeed to transcend or escape (*ativattati*) self—and likewise gendered self—altogether. If so, we would finally be able to understand things in accordance with what is true and real, and to act appropriately. And the possibility of unfettering from gendered self-identification and escaping the gendered self is where the entire discussion of gender becomes centrally a discussion about *indriyas* over gendered selves. For it is in identifying what is most powerful over the construction

⁹⁸ *MN 2*: 'The three fetterings... identity view, uncertainty [about precepts], and mishandling of observances' (*tīṇi samyojanāni... sakkāyadiṭṭhi, vicikicchā, sīlabbataparāmāso*).

of gendered selves and gendered self-identification⁹⁹ that progress might be made in figuring out how to combat or eliminate these bad, unskilful *indriyas*. Should those efforts succeed, the practitioner would finally be able to transcend or escape (*ativattati*) these gendered selves entirely.

At this point, I have yet to provide a close reading of the *Samyoga Sutta*'s theory of gender. But it is my hope that this introductory chapter provides necessary background for understanding the claims made in the *Samyoga Sutta*, and that it shows at minimum that the text does not, as Cabezón claims, presume the existence of gender without arguing for it. Indeed, by framing gender as yet another view of self to be abandoned, the *Samyoga Sutta* actively rejects the real existence of gender. Moreover, the argument for the rejection of all views of self has already been provided by multiple texts within the larger set. In the next chapter, I will offer a reading of *Samyoga Sutta* that acknowledges its intertextuality, as well as explain *manasi karoti* (which can be translated 'mentally generates'),¹⁰⁰ the final term that is central to establishing this as a psychological account of the irrational construction and subsequent escape from gender.

⁹⁹ This addresses the earlier question about whether *indriyas* over gender are good or bad, skilful or unskilful. For whatever these *indriyas* are, we know from the fact that they result in gendered self-internalisation that they promote anxiety, distress, and suffering. This makes them unskilful and bad under the sutta's soteriological classification of *indriyas*.

¹⁰⁰ I devote a section in the next chapter to a discussion of the meaning of this term.

Chapter 2

Irrational *Manasi-kāras* and Gender in the *Samyoga Sutta*

2.1 The central role of the *indriyas*

The *Samyoga Sutta* is highly formulaic, so I will begin with a few notes about its structure. Just as the declaration that introduces the sutta explains (*AN* 7.51 [i]), this sutta consists of two main teachings. The first teaching is dedicated to explaining ‘what fettering is like’ (*evaṃ... samyogo hoti*, [v]); the second is dedicated to answering ‘what is unfettering like?’ (*kathañ... visamyogo hoti*, [v]). Each teaching is further divided into four sections, which I have labelled and numbered in my translation (see **Appendix**) as such:

TEACHING ON FETTERING

[ii] Fettering to ‘Woman’ as Self

[iii] Fettering to ‘Man’ as Not-Self

[iv] Fettering to ‘Man’ as Self

[v] Fettering to ‘Woman’ as Not-Self

TEACHING ON UNFETTERING

[vi] Unfettering from ‘Woman’ as Self

[vii] Unfettering from ‘Man’ as Not-Self

[viii] Unfettering from ‘Man’ as Self

[ix] Unfettering from ‘Woman’ as Not-Self

Sections [ii] and [iii] of the *Teaching on Fettering* provide an example of a sentient being who views the world through a ‘woman self’ (*itth-attan*) and is psychologically fettered to this view of self—this being is thus known as a woman. Sections [iv] and [v] provide an example of a sentient being who views the world through a ‘man self’ (*puris-attan*) and is fettered to this view of self—

this being is thus known as a man. Sections [vi] and [vii] explain how a woman could escape from this ‘woman self’; sections [viii] and [ix] explain how a man could escape from this ‘man self’.

When it comes to organising these sections, then, there are two possible methods of organisation. First, we can organise them as sections on fettering and sections on unfettering. Here, sections [ii], [iii], [iv], and [v] explain fettering to gender, and sections [vi], [vii], [viii], and [ix] explain unfettering from gender. Second, we can organise them as sections on the ‘woman self’ and sections on the ‘man self’. Here, the reader can look at [ii], [iii], [vi], and [vii] together to understand fettering and unfettering to a ‘woman self’, or they can read [iv], [v], [viii], and [ix] to understand fettering and unfettering to a ‘man self’. In this chapter, I will focus on the four sections on fettering and unfettering to a ‘woman self’, for other than the replacement of ‘woman’ with ‘man’ and ‘man’ with ‘woman’, the wording of the sections is entirely identical. In this chapter, it should be understood that my analysis and conclusions about the fettering to a ‘woman self’ apply to the ‘man self’ as well.

The introductory paragraphs detailing the teaching on fettering to ‘woman’ as self are particularly useful for highlighting the terminologies that were discussed in the previous chapter:

[ii] Fettering to ‘Woman’ as Self. “Mendicants, a woman *manasi karotis* as internal to self (*ajjhatta*) what is *indriya* over ‘woman’—[where what is *indriya* is] behaviour belonging to ‘woman’, attire belonging to ‘woman’, thinking belonging to ‘woman’, desire belonging to ‘woman’, voice belonging to ‘woman’, adornment belonging to ‘woman’. She becomes attached to that and indulges in that.

[iii] Fettering to ‘Man’ as Not-Self. “Having become attached to that and having indulged in that, she *manasi karotis* as external [to self] (*bahiddhā*) what is *indriya* over ‘man’— [where what is *indriya* is] behaviour belonging to ‘man’, attire belonging to ‘man’, thinking belonging to ‘man’, desire belonging to ‘man’, voice belonging to ‘man’, adornment

belonging to ‘man’. She becomes attached to that and indulges in that. Having become attached to that and having indulged in that, she desires a fetter to what is external [to self]. She desires happiness and delight which arises for herself as a result of this fetter. Mendicants, these sentient beings have indulged in a ‘woman self’ and have undergone a fettering to ‘man’. In this way, mendicants, a woman does not escape the ‘woman self’.

(AN 7.51)

Here, we see the return of various terms that are consistently invoked in other passages about self. In addition to the explicit mention of ‘woman self’, which was previously established as just another inaccurate view of self to be abandoned, we also see the pairing of ‘internal to self’ and ‘external [to self]’, which has been established as an inaccurate metaphysical distinction that does not exist (*asanta*, MN 22). Moreover, we see the pattern of taking that which we perceive—behaviour, attire, thinking, desire, voice, adornment—as either ‘belonging to ‘woman’’ or ‘belonging to ‘man’’. Finally, we see the term ‘fettering’, which is used in suttas about self to specify fettering to the self-identification view. And as discussed in the previous chapter, we see that what is *indriya* over woman in this case does not identify some one thing, but includes a list of six things that the woman ‘*manasi karoti* as internal to self (*ajjhatta*)’.

With regard to the multiplicity of the things that are *indriya* over woman, this point is not translated accurately in the version of the text that Cabezón quotes in his book:

A woman, bhikkhus, attends internally to her feminine faculty, her feminine comportment, her feminine appearance, her feminine aspect, her feminine desire, her feminine voice, her feminine ornamentation.¹⁰¹

itthī, bhikkhave, ajjhattaṃ itth-indriyaṃ manasi karoti itthi-kuttaṃ itth-ākappaṃ itthi-vidhaṃ itthi-cchandaṃ itthi-ssaraṃ itth-ālankāraṃ. (AN 7.51)

¹⁰¹ Bodhi’s translation, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* 1039-40.

Here, the translation of *indriya* as some one ‘faculty’ appears, and it is treated as one member of a list of *seven* things that the woman attends to. This, however, is far from a natural way to read the text. For in Pāli, it is standard that the verb (i.e. *manasi karoti*) marks the end of the sentence part, grammatically separating what comes before the verb from what comes after the verb. While it is possible for this rule to be broken, this usually only happens in the case of poetry, where the need to fulfil certain metrical requirements allows for more liberties to be taken in word order. Thus, the natural way of reading the Pāli would be to treat this sentence as having two separate sentence parts:

itthī, bhikkhave, ajjhataṃ itth-indriyaṃ manasi karoti—itthi-kuttaṃ itth-ākappaṃ itthi-vidhaṃ itthi-cchandaṃ itthi-ssaraṃ itth-ālaṅkāraṃ. (AN 7.51)

And indeed, this version with the em-dash appears in the Mahāsaṅgīti edition of the Pali Tipiṭaka, making it clear that the verb marks the end of the first sentence part. Thus, it is not grammatically accurate to say that the woman *manasi karoti*-s seven different things, since the sentence only grammatically specifies ‘*itth-indriya*’ or *indriya* over woman as the accusative object that is being *manasi karoti*-ed. As for everything after the em-dash, these grammatically agree with the word ‘*indriya*’, indicating that the list of six things after the em-dash define what is *indriya* over ‘woman’. This natural grammatical reading is not only confirmed in the Mahāsaṅgīti edition,¹⁰² but is also confirmed in the passage of the *Indriya-vibhaṅga* that I discussed in the previous chapter,¹⁰³ proving that the Theravādin authors of the commentary understood the sutta’s descriptions in this way as well.

Is it impossible to read this as a list of seven objects? The answer is no, but also that a compelling overriding reason needs to be given for why the position of the verb was ignored in

¹⁰² And also in Sujato’s translation, *AN 7.51*.

¹⁰³ And also in U Thittila’s translation, *Vb 5*.

this situation. And here, it seems that the only reason that a translator might feel like they had no choice but to go against the natural word order is if they had already predetermined that it was impossible for *indriya* over woman to be anything but a singular faculty – e.g. a ‘feminine faculty’. For if the natural word order is acknowledged, then trying to read *indriya* over woman as some one material faculty or substance that is really ‘internal’ to the woman becomes impossible. Returning to the list of things that are defined as being *indriya* over woman according to the natural grammatical reading, we see:

...*indriya* over woman... [where what is *indriya* is] behaviour belonging to ‘woman’, attire belonging to ‘woman’, thinking belonging to ‘woman’, desire belonging to ‘woman’, voice belonging to ‘woman’, adornment belonging to ‘woman’. (AN 7.51 [ii])

If one has already predetermined that *indriya* over woman has to be a ‘feminine faculty’ that refers to a particular body part or material substance within the body of an individual, then this definition of *indriya* makes no sense at all. For it would be incomprehensible to define a material faculty as behaviour, attire, thinking, desire, voice, and adornment—it makes no sense to explain a *material* faculty as also being a behavioural or mental thing (behaviour, thinking); it makes no sense for attire and adornments (i.e. things that we wear *on* our bodies) to be included in such an ‘internal’ material faculty; and it also makes very little sense to define material faculty as ‘voice’ and ‘desire’, which would probably work better as effects of the faculty. Given all these obstacles, a translator who enters their reading of the text already assuming that *indriya* over woman has to refer to a ‘feminine faculty’ inside the body might feel like they have no choice but to bend the grammar in order to resolve this “issue”.

Unless, of course, it is not an issue at all. For when one falls back on the *nirvacana* meaning of *indriya*, accepting that it is possible for what is *indriya* to be multiple things which do not need to be unified into one bodily faculty, a far more robust reading of the text ensues – one where

unlike the *Jīvitindriya Sutta* which only lists ‘woman-*indriya*; man-*indriya*; life-*indriya*’ (SN 48.22) without explaining them, we are actually given definitions and candidates for what is *indriya* over woman and man. Understanding *indriya* over woman as what is most powerful over the ‘woman self’, we understand that this list of six things describe things which are somehow most powerful over the woman’s fettering to a ‘woman self’, and can proceed to read the sutta to understand exactly how these things are powerful over this negative soteriological outcome. Here, we receive extensive examples about how what is *indriya* over woman is “*manasi karoti-ed*” by individuals as internal to self and as belonging to ‘woman’, leading them step-by-step into being fettered to a ‘woman self’.

But because Cabezón was using a translation that treats *indriya* over woman as just one of seven things being “*manasi karoti-ed*”, the fact that—like the *Dutiya-vibhaṅga Sutta*’s discussion of *indriya* over the commitment to effort—this was centrally a text *about indriyas* over gender became obscured. All Cabezón had in the version of the translation he adopted was the mere mentions of ‘*itth-indriya*’ and ‘*puris-indriya*’ without any further explanation of what these terms are supposed to mean and what work they are supposed to do within the *Samyoga Sutta*. Thus, Cabezón takes the mentions of ‘*itth-indriya*’ and ‘*puris-indriya*’ in the *Samyoga Sutta* to be as unexplained as they were in the *Jīvitindriya Sutta*, concluding that though ‘these faculties are mentioned in Pāli... scriptures’, it is within Pāli Abhidhamma and Sanskrit Abhidharma that they are ‘clearly and extensively explained’.¹⁰⁴ And in accordance with this translation, Cabezón’s explanation of the discussion within the *Samyoga Sutta* does not make reference to the central role played by the *indriyas* over woman and man in this text, speaking instead of there being seven ‘features that together constitute someone’s gender identity’. In this chapter, I hope to be able to

¹⁰⁴ Cabezón 410.

undo some of the issues that were caused by the “seven objects” translation, showing how understanding *indriya* over woman and *indriya* over man is meant to enable one to take their first steps towards escaping their fetter to a gendered self.

2.2 The meaning of *manasi-kāra*

Throughout the above, I left *manasi karoti* untranslated since there is much that needs to be established about the meaning and use of this term in the *Sutta Piṭaka*. This is another term that the *Samyoga Sutta* shares with other suttas about self, and it is better known in its nominal form, *manasi-kāra* (Skt: *manas-kāra*). The most prominent translation of this term is ‘attention’, and as a result, the *Samyoga Sutta*’s use of its verb form *manasi karoti*¹⁰⁵ is usually translated as ‘attend’.¹⁰⁶ Note, however, that the word ‘attention’ is not derivable from the Pāli, and Bodhi supplies ‘making in the mind’ as the literal meaning of *manasi-kāra*.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, *manasi-kāra* is a phrase comprising (1) *kāra*, an action noun of creation (‘making’; ‘generating’; ‘producing’; ‘constructing’; ‘creating’), and (2) *manasi*, the locative form of *manas* or mind (‘in [one’s] mind’). Here, *manasi-kāra* refers to a type of mental activity which generates a cognitive object, and the verb *manasi karoti* refers to the generation of that cognitive object.

Along these lines, ‘mental application’¹⁰⁸ and ‘judgement’¹⁰⁹ appear as prominent translations of *manasi-kāra*. And in my own translation of the *Samyoga Sutta*, I defer to the literal meaning of *manasi karoti*—‘generates in [their] mind’, or more simply, ‘mentally generates’.

¹⁰⁵ Note that the variant form *manasikaroti* also shows up in the suttas, and appears to have the same meaning.

¹⁰⁶ See Bodhi’s translation, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* 1039-40.

¹⁰⁷ See Bodhi, *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* 81.

¹⁰⁸ The latter is suggested by Sangpo, who translates *manasi-kāra* as ‘mental application’, e.g., Sangpo’s translation, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam of Vasubandhu*, vol. 1, 519.

¹⁰⁹ See Pruden’s translation of la Vallée Poussin, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam of Vasubandhu*, vol. 2, 408.

However, I agree with Bodhi, Ganeri, and Cabezón that *manasi-kāra* is an attentive activity. As Ganeri explains based on the etymology of attention:

The verb ‘attend’ (Latin: *adtere*), whose etymology relates it to the mental action of stretching, indeed carries both a transitive use in the sense of turning the mind towards or away from, and an intransitive use with the meaning of attending upon; and attention is best pictured as the stretching out of experience onto and upon a part of the world. Our relationship to our environment is thus less like a spotlight shone on a screen, more like an aperture whose shape, size, and tilt can be adjusted from either side.¹¹⁰

With this etymology of ‘attention’ in mind, ‘attention’ is certainly a reasonable translation of *manasi-kāra*, a term which denotes the generation of a cognitive object by focusing upon and grasping some feature of the world—be they material or mental. In the *Manasikāra Sutta*, for example, the successful practitioner is able to *manasi karoti* or attend to their own idea of the stilling of all conditions, etc. in a way that allows them to attain a state of single-minded concentration (*samādhi-paṭilābha*):

“For example, Ānanda, a mendicant *manasi karoti*-s in this way: ‘this is peaceful, this is excellent—that is, the stilling of all conditions, the rejection of all attachment, the extinction of craving, the absence of desire, cessation, extinguishing.’

In this way, Ānanda, the mendicant might attain such a form of single-mindedness that they would not *manasi karoti* the eye, they would not *manasi karoti* material form... they would not *manasi karoti* whatever is seen, heard, thought, known, attained, sought, and explored by the mind’; and yet they would *manasi karoti*.”

idha Ānanda, bhikkhu evaṃ manasi karoti: ‘etaṃ santaṃ etaṃ paṇītaṃ, yad-idaṃ sabba-sankhāra-samatho sabb-ūpadhi-paṭinissaggo taṇhā-kkhayo virāgo nirodho nibbānan’ti.

¹¹⁰ Ganeri, *Attention, Not Self* 12.

evaṃ kho, Ānanda, siyā bhikkhuno tathā-rūpo samādhī-paṭilābho yathā na cakkhumā manasi kareyya, na rūpaṃ manasi kareyya ...pe... yampi daṃ diṭṭhaṃ suttaṃ mutaṃ viññātaṃ pattaṃ pariyesitaṃ anuvicariṭaṃ manasā, tampi na manasi kareyya; manasi ca pana kareyya' iti. (AN 11.8)

Here, the activity of *manasi-kāra* can be divided into two main operations. The first is the activity of focusing on a specified object or selection of objects. The meditator begins by focusing their minds on attending to a specific idea – one of the stilling of all conditions, the rejection of all attachment, the extinction of craving, etc. In doing so, they exclude from their awareness all other aspects of reality, such as the presence of material forms, the presence of sounds, other thoughts and ideas, etc. This operation is discussed as ‘attentional placing’ by Ganeri.¹¹¹

The second operation associated with *manasi karoti* is the activity of identifying labels that apply to the things being *manasi karoti*-ed. While focusing on the stilling of all conditions, the rejection of all attachment, etc., the meditator gathers information about these things, noting that these are ‘peaceful’ and ‘excellent’ and labelling them as such. As the *Kolita Sutta* explains, ‘labels (*saññā*) accompanied by reflection (*vitakka*) beset me due to *manasi-kāra*’.¹¹² Through this second operation, the object of attention (the idea of the stilling of all conditions, etc.) is synthesised into a robust cognitive object (‘the stilling of all conditions, etc., is *peaceful* and *excellent*’). This operation is discussed as ‘attentional focusing’ by Ganeri.¹¹³ It is in these two respects that *manasi-kāra* is accurately discussed as an attentive mental activity.

¹¹¹ Ganeri describes attentional placing as ‘an exclusion operation which controls the window of attention’ (*Attention, Not Self* 122).

¹¹² SN 21.1: *vitakka-sahagatā saññā manasi-kārā samudācaranti.*

¹¹³ Ganeri: ‘Attentional placing is selection through exclusion. Attentional focusing, bringing-to-mind (*manasikāra*), is an ‘attenuation’ of the features of an object within the attention window. What that means is that properties of an object or region, an object or region that has been selected by placing the attention window before it, are now accessed. Accessing the properties of an object is a way of identifying or recognizing it (*saññā*)’ (*Attention, Not Self* 123).

The above describes a case of attention where the operation of attentional placing results in the grasping of accurate labels for the object of attention, resulting in the synthesis of an accurate cognitive object. And indeed, this is the aim of all *manasi-kāras*, and is likewise the aim of attention. They both, as Ganeri notes, have a ‘necessary truth-orientation’.¹¹⁴ Thus, when *manasi-kāras* of what is *indriya* over woman and *manasi-kāras* of what is *indriya* over man are described in the *Samyoga Sutta*, the individual *manasi karoti*-ing these can be understood to be engaging in attentional focusing and attentional placing with the aim of synthesising and generating an accurate cognitive object.

The sutta proceeds to explain that when one *manasi karoti*-s what is *indriya* over woman, they are *manasi karoti*-ing features like deportment of a woman, behaviour of a woman, attire of a woman, desire of a woman, voice of a woman, and adornment of a woman. And when one *manasi karoti*-s what is *indriya* over man, they are *manasi karoti*-ing features like deportment of a man, behaviour of a man, attire of a man, desire of a man, voice of a man, and adornment of a man. Following the translation of *manasi karoti* as ‘attend’, Cabezón takes this to be a case of accurate attention as well:

Women and men who “attend to”—that is, who emphasize or obsess about—their gender identities... [engaging in] a narcissistic moment of reveling in those features that together constitute someone’s gender identity.¹¹⁵

Note that when Cabezón mentions ‘those features that together constitute someone’s gender identity’, he is referring to all the objects—including the *indriyas* or ‘faculties’—that the “seven

¹¹⁴ Ganeri suggests that O’Shaughnessy’s discussion of attention as a ‘reality-detector’ echoes what is going on with Buddhist *manasi-kāra* or attention: ‘Attention is necessary for consciousness because consciousness has a necessary truth-orientation; it is a ‘reality-detector’, and indeed that is what it means to say that consciousness puts us in contact with reality... There are already echoes here of two claims Buddhists make, that perceptual engagement (*phassa*) and attention (*manasikarā*) are concomitants—O’Shaughnessy speaks rather of *commitments*—of consciousness’ (*Attention, Not Self* 10).

¹¹⁵ Cabezón 388.

objects” translation identifies. And while he considers the resultant arising of attachment and indulgence and fixation to be a ‘mentalistic explanation’¹¹⁶ of how sexual desire arises as opposed to one based on ‘natural predisposition’,¹¹⁷ he does not consider that the gendered features being *manasi karoti*-ed or mentally generated might be mentalistic as well. Rather, he takes it to be the case that these gendered features really do exist and really do constitute one’s gender identity, and points out that this makes it ‘normal and understandable’¹¹⁸ that we end up fixating on these things.

Cabezón proceeds to compare the *Samyoga Sutta* to a Mahāyāna text called the *Pitāputrasamāgama Sūtra*, where a very similar passage is found. But instead of the verb ‘*manasi karoti*’, Cabezón explains that the extant Tibetan translation of the *Pitāputrasamāgama Sūtra* uses the verbs ‘conceive’ (*rtog*) and ‘imagine’ (*brtag*). He translates the passage as such:¹¹⁹

Great King, women introspect and **conceive**, “I am a woman.” **Having imagined** that what is inside them is “woman,” they **conceive** of the man outside them as “man.”¹²⁰

*rgyal po chen po bud med nang du bdag ni bud med do zhes rtog cing. de nang du bud med ces brtags nas, phyi rol du skyes pa la skyes pa'o zhes rtog go.*¹²¹

Cabezón explains, ‘The words “conceive” and “imagine” in this passage have a negative connotation. What women and men conceive and imagine, their own gender identities, are misconceptions.’¹²² Thus, he concludes that compared to the *Samyoga Sutta*, the Mahāyāna *Pitāputrasamāgama Sūtra* is ‘more radical in its denial of the reality of gender.’

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ My emphasis in bold.

¹²⁰ Cabezón’s translation, 389.

¹²¹ *Pitāputrasamāgama Sūtra*, D Kangyur, 128b

¹²² Cabezón 389.

I disagree with Cabezón's conclusion that the *Samyoga Sutta* does not deny the reality of gender. In his discussion of the *Pitāputrasamāgama Sūtra*, Cabezón readily accepts that verbs like 'conceive' and 'imagine' allow for both positive and negative connotations, and he concludes in the case of this Mahāyāna text that it has a negative connotation in this instance and that gender identity here is a 'misconception'. But in his earlier discussion of the *Samyoga Sutta*, he does not give the same consideration to the verb *manasi karoti*, even though the literal meaning of 'generate in the mind' does allow for the same breadth of meaning.¹²³ Consider the following short scenario where I default to the literal meaning of *manasi karoti*:

When I enter the office at night, the tables and chairs before me are *generated in my mind* and I successfully avoid them. Hearing an eerie echoing voice behind me, I *generate in my mind* the voice of a lurking malevolent ghoul and scream in terror.

Both of the mental activities described in this scenario are attentive. In the first sentence, I am attending to the tables and chairs; in the second, I am attending to the echoing voice. In this sense, they are both truth-oriented activities. However, the literal translation of *manasi-kāra* allows there to be a mismatch between what is attended to and what we cognise based on it. Since I did not end up bumping into anything, it can be inferred that my first cognitive object of the tables and chairs was accurate enough. But in the second scenario, I have mentally generated that this voice belongs to a lurking malevolent ghost even though all I have heard at this point is an echoing voice. Upon investigation, I might realise that this voice actually belongs to a colleague who was working into the night.

Thus, the literal translation of *manasi-kāra* allows that we might make errors about the things to which we are attending. To bring back the terms from the *Kolita Sutta*, this would allow

¹²³ Indeed, *rtog* and *rtog* are frequent equivalents for *manasi karoti*, making both passages even more similar.

for inaccuracy when it comes to the labels (*saññā*) I place upon what I attend to and the reflections (*vitakka*) that accompany these labels. So why, when identity and self-identification of any kind is such a contentious issue in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, is it not considered that the *manasi-kāra* or mental generation of gender identity might also be a misconception there?

And if Cabezón is right that just like the *manasi-kāra* in the *Manasikāra Sutta*, the *manasi-kāras* in the *Samyoga Sutta* are also accurate, then another question arises in the context of the *Samyoga Sutta*. For unlike the *Manasikāra Sutta*'s positive portrayal of the meditator's *manasi-kāras*, the *manasi-kāras* of gendered features in the *Samyoga Sutta* are portrayed as being so bad that the only advice given is to stop doing them altogether. So if the *manasi-kāras* in the *Samyoga Sutta* are wholly accurate and real and the 'features that together constitute someone's gender identity' are being accurately grasped, then some explanation of what it means for a *manasi-kāra* to be both accurate to reality *and* bad would need to be offered.

Returning to Cabezón's explanation of 'attend' above, we see that he provides such an account when he adds various qualifiers to the meaning of *manasi karoti* in the *Samyoga Sutta*. Instead of framing these *manasi-kāra* as simple cases of attentional focusing, he explains them as cases of attentional focusing driven by narcissism. Indulging in 'a narcissistic moment of reveling', they proceed to 'emphasize or obsess about' their real gender identities. This contributes to Cabezón's framing of the text as being morally 'didactic' and 'sex-negative'.¹²⁴ On this reading, the sutta's issue is not anything about the non-reality of the woman's identity as a woman or the man's identity as a man—gender identity is in fact real and composed of real gendered features. Thus, any issues with attending to gender identity would be based on moral concerns about narcissism or negative moral attitudes towards gender and sex.

¹²⁴ Cabezón 388.

This moral account of the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ *manasi-kāras* could potentially be derived from one prominent translation of the distinction between *yoniso manasi-kāra* and *ayoniso manasi-kāra*—‘proper attention’ and ‘improper attention’.¹²⁵ Here, one might take ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ to be moral qualities, interpreting this as a distinction between attention that is morally proper and attention that is morally improper. Indeed, there is one *Vinaya* passage that could support this interpretation of the distinction. In this passage, King Udena asks Ānanda how the mendicants made use of the five hundred upper robes that were gifted to them. Ānanda explains that they were used to replace worn out robes, then the worn out robes were used to make bedspreads, then the old bedspreads were made into mattress covers, etc. Learning that all the material was used, King Udena describes their use of the material as *yoniso* (*Kd* 21: *yoniso upanenti*). Here, it is possible that King Udena is making a moral judgement about the mendicants’ lack of wastefulness. Thus, interpreting *yoniso* and *ayoniso* as being about moral propriety and impropriety might be reasonable.

And where the difference between *yoniso* and *ayoniso manasi-kāra* is taken to be centrally a difference between morally proper and improper attention, it might be assumed as a result that the difference between proper and improper *manasi-kāra* lies in the relevance or moral status of the real object of attention—when we attend properly, we are attending to “skilful” real objects, and when we attend improperly, we are attending to “unskilful” real objects.¹²⁶ This is one way of interpreting a line from the *Anaṅgaṇa Sutta*: ‘Because of the *manasi-kārā* of that sign (*nimitta*) of

¹²⁵ This is I. B. Horner’s translation of *Milindapañha* 32-3, and it is also the translation that Ganeri adopts in his discussion of the term (*Attention, Not Self* 147-50).

¹²⁶ This is one of the ways in which Ganeri characterises Buddhaghosa’s invocation of this distinction: ‘He agrees with the ancients, and with thinkers like Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, who have drawn inspiration from them, in claiming that moral attention—the settling on what is good (i.e. wholesome, *kusala*) and the shunning of what is bad (*akusala*)—is a distinct ethical virtue’ (*Attention, Not Self* 32).

beauty, attachment will come to mind.¹²⁷ Here, if *manasi-kārā* is treated as a case of non-erroneous, morally improper attention, it could be concluded that it is the real presence of beautiful objects that causes our attachment and leads us to obsessively attend to them. And because they have characteristics that encourage this kind of excessive attention, the moral solution would be to direct our attention elsewhere and do our best to stop engaging with these real and morally unskilful objects.

This, then, is one possible reading of how *manasi karoti* should be understood in the *Samyoga Sutta*. And if Cabezón's reading of the *Samyoga Sutta* is accurate, then there are several major claims in the *Samyoga Sutta* that directly contradict the arguments and claims made in the other suttas about self:

Firstly, Cabezón claims that there is a presumption of real, dimorphic gender identity in the *Samyoga Sutta*—that is, a person could, in accordance with what is real and true, be accurately described as having one of two possible gender identities. But the term 'gender identity' would certainly raise alarm bells within the context of the suttas, for any form of self-identification is deemed to be both morally reprehensible and metaphysically unfounded. Indeed, 'woman self' and 'man self' are the closest terms we can find for gender identity in the *Samyoga Sutta*, and it has already been established in my previous chapter that no view of self would be accepted as real or true within the suttas.

Moreover, since the suttas claim that nothing can be appropriately classified as internal to self or belonging to self, the phrase 'features that together constitute someone's gender identity' would raise similar alarm bells. After all, these features cannot be accurately said to be internal to a gendered self, nor can they be accurately said to belong to it. Considering these features in

¹²⁷ MN 5: *tassa subha-nimittassa manasi-kārā rāgo cittaṃ anuddhaṃ sessati.*

accordance with what is real and true entails understanding that they are not the kinds of things that could or should be incorporated into a gendered self.

Finally, this concept of narcissistic attention is in tension with the rest of the suttas. Why exactly is an individual's attention towards gendered features narcissistic in Cabezón's view? If the reasoning is that the individual is attending to what is truly theirs—their gendered features, their gender identity—and getting excessively attached to them upon this basis, then this would be the opposite of what is claimed in other suttas about self. For in the other suttas, it is not the existence of what is truly mine that encourages my narcissistic obsession, but narcissism that motivates me to inaccurately determine of some things that they are truly mine.

So if this is the meaning of *manasi karoti* in the *Samyoga Sutta*, then this would be a major issue with the text. In addition to all the contradictions with the other suttas about self, the *Samyoga Sutta* would also fail to live up to its initial declaration that gendered selves can and should be transcended. For if the recommendation is simply to try our best to direct our attention away from all the real things that are *indriya* or powerful over gender identity, then this certainly does not suffice for escaping (*ativattati*) gender. This would be as ineffectual as trying to extinguish a fire burning in my kitchen by deciding not to attend to it. Thus, it is no surprise that Cabezón expresses disappointment in the text, criticising it for its failure to live up to its declaration that gender can and should be transcended:

While its ostensible purpose is sex--negative and didactic—the text urges women and men not to attend to their gender identities, to transcend their femaleness and maleness—it also implies gender dimorphism and heteronormativity.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Cabezón 388.

In what follows, I will argue that this is not the correct interpretation of the distinction between *yoniso* and *ayoniso*, nor is it the correct interpretation of the meaning of *manasi-kāra*. By providing evidence from various examples and definitions across the suttas, I argue that *yoniso* and *ayoniso* should not be interpreted as a distinction between moral propriety and impropriety. Rather, it is a distinction between rationality and irrationality, where ‘rationality’ requires both well-connected reasoning and factual accuracy.

I will then show how this distinction functions in the case of *manasi-kāras*. When we encounter examples of *ayoniso* or irrational *manasi-kāras*, we see that it is not only possible but vastly the norm for our *manasi-kāras* to be erroneous. Though *manasi-kāras* always involve attending to some real feature of the world, what makes our *manasi-kāras* irrational is our imposition of inaccurate labels and reflections upon these features, resulting in the generation of a misleading and inaccurate cognitive object of that feature. Finally, having justified my reading of rational and irrational *manasi-kāras*, I end the chapter by explaining how this is used to support the *Samyoga Sutta*’s psychological account of the irrational construction of gendered selves.

2.3 *Yoniso* and *ayoniso*

Earlier, I noted that *ayoniso manasi-kāras* is often translated as ‘proper’ attention, and that one might conclude from this that instances of *manasi-kāra* are deemed to be bad because of their moral impropriety. Here, it is worth looking into the meaning of the Pāli adverb ‘*yoniso*’. Morphologically, *yoniso* is an adverbial ablative of the word *yonī* (‘womb’; ‘origin’; ‘source’), and literally translates as ‘by way of its origin’ or ‘in accordance with its origin’. By adding the

privative *a*-prefix (‘not’), *ayoniso* is derived. In context of the suttas, *yoniso* and *ayoniso* take on a specific technical meaning, which is defined and employed across the suttas.¹²⁹

I will begin with the definition provided in the *Ayoniso Sutta*. Here, the Buddha urges his mendicants to work on avoiding dialectical moves associated with the foolish individual and emulating dialectical moves associated with the astute individual. He continues to invoke *ayoniso* and *yoniso* in his explanation of these characteristics:

A foolish individual... forms questions in a way that is *ayoni*, answers questions in a way that is *ayoni*, and when someone answers a question in a way that is *yonī*—[i.e.] with factual premises and a well-connected approach—they disagree with it...

A learned individual... forms questions in a way that is *yonī*, answers questions in a way that is *yonī*, and when someone answers a question in a way that is *yonī*—[i.e.] with factual premises and a well-connected approach—they agree with it.

bālo... ayoniso pañhaṃ kattā hoti, ayoniso pañhaṃ vissajjetā hoti, parassa kho pana yoniso pañhaṃ vissajjitaṃ parimaṇḍalehi pada-byañjanehi siliṭṭhehi upagatehi na abbhanumoditā hoti...

paṇḍito... yoniso pañhaṃ kattā hoti, yoniso pañhaṃ vissajjetā hoti, parassa kho pana yoniso pañhaṃ vissajjitaṃ parimaṇḍalehi pada-byañjanehi siliṭṭhehi upagatehi abbhanumoditā hoti. (AN 3.5)

Here, the Buddha focuses on three activities that are portrayed as central to monastic life: posing questions, answering questions, and responding to the arguments. We often encounter descriptions of individuals posing questions to the Buddha. Some of these questions are praised by the Buddha as good questions,¹³⁰ but there are cases where the Buddha responds by identifying issues with the

¹²⁹ See Sujato, “On the Meaning of *Yoniso*”: ‘It seems that the non-Buddhist sources only know this meaning, and that the usage in Buddhism is quite distinct.’

¹³⁰ E.g., *AN 4.186*, where the Buddha praises a mendicant for asking good questions: ‘*sādhū sādhū, bhikkhu. bhaddako kho te, bhikkhu, ummaggo, bhaddakaṃ paṭibhānaṃ, kalyāṇī paripucchā.*’

questions being asked.¹³¹ We also see plenty of cases where Buddhist mendicants must answer questions about the Buddha’s teachings, and the Buddha praises them for answering these questions well.¹³² And in many suttas, the Buddha propounds his own arguments or teachings. In many of them, there are depictions of individuals who respond by agreeing or coming to some further understanding based on his arguments,¹³³ but there are also depictions of wanderers of other religions who respond by mischaracterising them or rejecting them.¹³⁴

The *Ayoniso Sutta* provides a framework for differentiating between foolish and astute dialectical moves. It is explained that a dialectical move is astute if one goes about it in a way that is *yonī*—i.e., ‘with factual premises and a well-connected approach’. In contrast, a dialectical move is foolish if one goes about it in a way that is *ayonī*—i.e., with false premises and a disconnected approach. This introduces two characteristics that make something *yoniso*: factual accuracy and well-connectedness.

I begin with the characteristic of factual accuracy. The word I opt to translate as ‘factual’ is *parimaṇḍala* (lit. ‘perfectly-rounded’¹³⁵); the compound I translate as ‘premises’ is *pada-byañjana* (lit. ‘syllables that make up sentences’). In the suttas, this phrase is often used to convey the collective accuracy of the syllables (*byañjana*) constituting a *pada*—i.e., the accuracy of a sentence or sentence part. Because of the emphasis on accurate syllables, Gamage frames this as

¹³¹ E.g., *MN 72*, where Vacchagotta asks whether the Buddha would exist or not exist after his death, and the Buddha responds that this was a badly-formed question.

¹³² E.g., *AN 10.94*, where the Buddha is depicted as being on retreat, leaving his disciple Vajjiyamāhita to attend to wanderers of other religions who had questions about the Buddha’s views. Later, Vajjiyamāhita relays his answers to the Buddha, who confirms the accuracy of Vajjiyamāhita’s answers and praises them.

¹³³ E.g., *SN 56*, where Koṇḍañña responds to the Buddha’s explanation of the four noble truths by realising that ‘All *dhammas* which are produced are *dhammas* which are liable to cessation’ (*yaṃ kiñci samudaya-dhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodha-dhamman*).

¹³⁴ E.g., *AN 8.11*, where the Buddha addresses and rejects various mischaracterisation of his arguments, e.g., that his arguments promote annihilationism, inaction, etc.

¹³⁵ See Burke 273: ‘*parimaṇḍala* is a compound of the *karmadhāraya* type consisting of two components, namely, (a) an indeclinable—*pari*—which in the beginning of a compound expresses fullness or a high degree of something, and (b) a noun *maṇḍala* that has the meaning of “globe, orb, circumference, wheel, a disk (esp. of the sun or moon).”’

being primarily about ‘accuracy of pronunciation’, where audibility and pleasantness of voice are taken to be rhetorical flourishes that increase the conviction and interest of listeners.¹³⁶ But in the context of the suttas, the concern about accurate syllables is not about pronunciation at all.

While the focus on the accuracy of individual syllables might appear to be a quibble about differences in pronunciation, the real concern is the factual accuracy of the resulting sentence part or sentence, which I translate as ‘premise’. In Pāli, nearly every individual syllable encodes information that influences the meaning of the sentence being formed. Thus, choosing one’s syllables carefully becomes very important. By elongating or shortening a vowel, I can change the number or case of a noun. By adding a slight sibilance, I can change the tense of a verb. By aspirating or deaspirating a consonant, I convey different words entirely. Thus, a sentence is constructed by making choices about each syllable being articulated, and it is only through synthesising the information conveyed by every syllable that we are able to determine whether the resultant sentence or sentence part makes sense.

Indeed, when we assess the questions, answers, and responses described in the suttas, none of them are ever criticised by the Buddha for having differently-pronounced syllables or for using syllables that result in an ungrammatical sentence. Thus, when the *Ayoniso Sutta* states that forming questions and responses in a *ayoni* way involves failing to use our syllables to create sentences that are *parimaṇḍala*, the sense of accuracy conveyed by *parimaṇḍala* cannot be centrally about pronunciation or grammar. Rather, we consistently see that the Buddha takes issue with individual sentences or sentence parts that contain false claims. Take the question formed by Vacchagotta, where the Buddha specifically criticises his inclusion of the verb *upapajjati*:

¹³⁶ Gamage 141.

“But my dear Gotama, when the monk’s mind is freed in this way, where is he reborn?”—

“‘He is reborn’, Vaccha, is not accurate.”

“*evaṃ vimutta-citto pana, bho Gotama, bhikkhu kuhiṃ upapajjati*” iti?—“*upapajjati iti kho, Vaccha, na upeti*”. (MN 72)

Here, the Buddha’s issue with ‘*upapajjati*’ is not to do with how Vacchagotta pronounced it, nor does it commit some grammatical error that makes the sentence incomprehensible. On the contrary, Vacchagotta successfully articulates and employs each syllable of *upapajjati* to convey the following information: he (-*ti*) goes (*pad*) inside (*upa-*) somewhere—i.e., he enters somewhere. Put together with the rest of the sentence, Vacchagotta successfully conveys his question: *when a monk attains cessation, wherein does he subsequently go?* In the context of the suttas, this usually has the meaning of “where is he reborn?” The Buddha does not answer the question. Instead, he explains the inaccuracy of Vacchagotta’s use the verb *upapajjati* using the following analogy:

But suppose, Vaccha, that someone were to ask a question in this way: “When this fire in front of you was extinguished, in which direction—east, south, west, or north—did the fire go?”

“*sace pana taṃ, vaccha, evaṃ puccheyya: ‘yo te ayaṃ purato aggi nibbuto so aggi ito katamaṃ disaṃ gato—puratthimaṃ vā dakkhiṇaṃ vā pacchimaṃ vā uttaraṃ vā’ ti?*” (MN 72)

Once a fire is extinguished, there is no fire to speak of, and there is no sense in asking where that fire has gone. Likewise, when cessation is attained, there is no monk to speak of, and there is no sense in asking where that monk has gone. Here, it is explained that ‘one who has gone’ (*tathāgata*) has ceased all (*sabba*) I-making (*ahaṅ-kāra*) and mine-making (*mamaṅ-kāra*). Thus, the reason that the Buddha takes issue with *upapajjati* in this sentence is because it supplies false information: it speaks of an individual (-*ti*) that exists after cessation and of that very individual entering or

arriving or being reborn (*upa-pad*) somewhere after cessation when the whole point is that the attainment of cessation requires the cessation of all I-making and mine-making activities, making it such that no individual would be found. Returning to the criteria of forming a question in a way that is *ayoni*, we can characterise Vacchagotta’s question as being formed in a way that relies on false premises. For this reason, I take *parimaṇḍala* to be specifically about stringing syllables together in a way that creates factual premises. And with regards to this characteristic, it is possible to analyse the literal meaning of *yoniso*—‘in accordance with its origin’—as having the connotation of sticking to the true nature of things.

Next, I discuss the characteristic of having a ‘well-connected approach’. The word I opt to translate as ‘well-connected’ in this context is *siliṭṭha* (lit. ‘connected’; ‘adhering’; ‘contiguous’).¹³⁷ Unlike *parimaṇḍala*, this word does not appear frequently in the suttas. However, based on the descriptions in the *Ayoniso Sutta*, failing to do something ‘by way of its origin’ (*yoniso*) also seems to involve a disconnect between one’s goal and one’s approach towards achieving it.¹³⁸ Specifically, something appears to have gone wrong with their process of reasoning. The foolish individual aims to obtain the right answer, but fails because they proceed to ask disconnected questions; they are tasked to provide the correct response, but fail because they provide a disconnected answer; they are provided with a correct argument, but offer a disconnected response when they reject the argument instead of accepting it.

Additional examples from the *Bhūmija Sutta* can be used to corroborate this reading. Here, the Buddha gives the monk Bhūmija several cases of individuals failing to obtain the right results because their method was *ayoni*:

¹³⁷ In Sanskrit literature, *śliṣṭa* ends up being associated with bitextuality (*śleṣa*), where one is so skilled at connecting words through *sandhi*, compounding etc., that they are able to write poems that can be read in two different ways. See Bronner.

¹³⁸ Cf. Sujato, “On the Meaning of *Yoniso*” where he proposes that *yoniso* means ‘the causes are in line with the effects. I.e., the acts you perform actually produce the results you’re looking for.’

Bhūmija, suppose a person who wanted milk was seeking milk. Wandering in search of milk, they might have pulled the horn of a cow which was a young calf... they are unable to obtain it... What is the reason for that? Bhūmija, it is an *ayoni* way to obtain milk.

seyyathāpi, Bhūmija, puriso khīr-atthiko khīra-gavesī khīra-pariyesanaṃ caramāno gāviṃ taruṇa-vacchaṃ visāṇato āviñcheyya... abhabbo khīrassa adhigamāya... taṃ kissa hetu? ayoni hesā, Bhūmija, khīrassa adhigamāya. (MN 126)

The person aims to obtain milk, but fails to come up with a series of connected steps that will get them to their goal. Knowing that they want milk, they start ‘wandering’ (*caramāna*) in search of it. When they stumble upon a cow, they do not seem to know what to do with it. Instead of gathering knowledge about cows, such as figuring out where their milk comes from and how it should be obtained, it is said in the optative mood that ‘they *might* have pulled the horn of a cow’. This obviously results in failure, and the Buddha explains that the reason for this failure is because ‘it is an *ayoni* way to obtain milk’.

Just like the *Ayoniso Sutta*’s description of disconnected reasoning, this example about milk seems to involve a series of failures on the person’s part to engage in well-connected logical steps to realise their goal. Moreover, it seems like failures in connected reasoning contribute to failures in factual accuracy—it is because I do not engage in the necessary fact-finding that I remain ignorant about cows, and it is this ignorance about cows that leads me to inaccurately believe that it is worthwhile to pull the horn of the cow. Conversely, my false beliefs might lead me to respond as if these beliefs are true, creating a disconnect between my responses and my initial goal. This, then, is why the Buddha proceeds to associate this kind of disconnected reasoning with wrong view (*MN 126: ‘micchā-diṭṭhi’*).

Returning to the *Vinaya* passage about King Udena: the sutta explains that King Udena’s bafflement upon hearing that the mendicants had been gifted five hundred robes was due to his

inability to understand how a bunch of ascetics could possibly make use of all these brand new robes. When Ānanda systematically explains his plans for putting all five-hundred robes to use, he demonstrates well-connected reasoning:

“But what will you do with five hundred robes?” “I’ll share them with those monks whose robes are worn out.” “And what will you do with the worn out robes?” “We’ll make them into bedspreads.” “And what will you do with the old bedspreads?” “We’ll make them into mattress covers.” “And what will you do with the old mattress covers?” “We’ll make them into floor covers.” “And what will you do with the old floor covers?” “We’ll make them into doormats.” “And what will you do with the old doormats?” “We’ll make them into dustcloths.” “And what will you do with the old dustcloths?” “We’ll cut them up, mix them with mud, and smear the floors.” King Udena thought, “These Sakyan monastics utilise things in a way that is *yoni*. Nothing is put into storage.” (*Kd 21*)¹³⁹

In the example above, we see the differences between the *ayoni* way that the person tried and failed to get milk and the *yoni* way that Ānanda planned to make use of this gift. Unlike the person who failed to engage in appropriate fact-finding before wandering aimlessly and ineffectually pulling on a cow’s horn, it is clear that Ānanda had all the appropriate facts about how fabrics in various stages of wear could be used. As such, he was able to systematically explain how each higher-quality fabric would be progressively used to replace a lower-quality counterpart, all the way down to the fabric scraps used for mud flooring. Because of the factual accuracy of his knowledge and his very well-connected reasoning, Ānanda was successful in making use of all five hundred robes.

Throughout the suttas, we see that the descriptors ‘*yoniso*’ and ‘*ayoniso*’ are used to account for successes and failures in our reasoning. When we set ourselves a task and accomplish it, we know that our reasoning was *yoniso*, by which we understand that the logical steps we took

¹³⁹ From Brahmali’s translation, *Theravāda Collection on Monastic Law*, with some edits.

were well-connected and the beliefs we held were factually accurate. And when we fail to obtain the right answers or results, we immediately understand that our reasoning was *ayoniso*. By accurately identifying the factual inaccuracies and disconnects in our reasoning, we are able to correct them and make progress towards obtaining the right results.

So, while there is nothing particularly egregious about translating *yoniso* and *ayoniso* as ‘proper’ and ‘improper’, given the heavy focus on factual accuracy and well-connected reasoning, I think that Ñāṇamoli’s translation of *yoniso* as ‘reasoned’,¹⁴⁰ Pruden’s translation of *ayoniso* as ‘incorrect’,¹⁴¹ and Sujato’s translation of *yoniso* and *ayoniso* as ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ are far more precise. ‘Reasoned’ captures the aspect of *yoniso* which is related to well-connected reasoning; ‘correct’ captures the aspect of *yoniso* that relates to factual accuracy. And ‘rational’ seems to be flexible enough to cover both aspects of *yoniso*—it is this last translation by Sujato that I will defer to in what follows.

Therefore, *yoniso* and *ayoniso* are not primarily about moral propriety and impropriety; they are only secondarily so, since being mistaken about what is real and reasoning badly about it is the cause of suffering. Subsequently, when the *Samyoga Sutta* frames *manasi-kāras* of gender identity as *ayoniso*, it means that they are irrational. But since the term ‘*ayoniso*’ can be applied to cases of factual inaccuracy and to cases of disconnected reasoning, Cabezón’s explanation of how the *manasi-kāras* of gendered features are *ayoniso* cannot be ruled out at this point. For a fully accurate *manasi-kāras* could potentially be described as *ayoniso* if disconnected reasoning were involved. As long as the choice of accurately attending to something (e.g., gendered features,

¹⁴⁰ See Ñāṇamoli’s translation, *Piṭaka Disclosure, Peṭakopadesa I*.

¹⁴¹ See Pruden’s translation, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam of Vasubandhu*, vol. 2, 408.

gender identity) is disconnected from or counterproductive to one's actual aims, there is an argument for this counting as an irrational *manasi-kāra*.

Given this possibility, it is important to look at how *ayoniso manasi-kāras* are actually described in suttas about the self and gendered self. When our *manasi-kāras* are criticised in these texts, are they consistently criticised on only one of these fronts? If so, this would be good evidence for the view that these *manasi-kāras* are accurate, and that they are *ayoniso manasi-kāras* only because they involve attending to morally unskilful objects that might distract us or disconnect us from our moral goals.

2.4 Irrational *manasi-kāras* and viewing through gendered self

Before I delve into examples of irrational *manasi-kāras*, I would like to take a moment to return to a distinction introduced in the previous chapter. We know from the *Samyoga Sutta*'s focus on gendered selves that it belongs to the set of suttas about self, and these suttas have already provided us a perfectly workable model of two kinds of mental activities. There is, on the one hand, observing the world through self (*attanā*), and on the other, observing the world in accordance with what is real and true (*yathā-bhūtam*).

In these suttas, we are told that observing the world through self involves ascribing inaccurate metaphysical characteristics to things. We mistakenly label things as 'self', 'belonging to self', 'internal to self', 'permanent', 'unconditioned', etc. Moreover, we are told that when we engage with the world using these false metaphysical assumptions, we constantly experience a disconnect between our expectations and reality. Labelling an object as 'belonging to myself' and failing to thoroughly interrogate my belief in this label, I proceed to interact with it as if it does in fact belong to myself and end up disappointed when this results in affliction (*āsava*) and suffering

instead of the happiness and security I was originally seeking. Measuring this mental process against the characteristics of *ayoniso* reasoning, it seems that this process involves both factual inaccuracies and disconnected reasoning.

In contrast, to observe the world in accordance with what is real and true requires one to begin by thoroughly interrogating all the labels that we ascribe to things, until all we are left with are the accurate labels—‘impermanent’, ‘conditioned’, ‘bound towards annihilation’, etc. And having accurately labelled these things, we must come to comprehend that we cannot seek to control or possess without engendering suffering and affliction (*āsava*). Only then can we make the relevant adjustments to our interactions with these objects. It is only when we have successfully made these adjustments that we are able to avoid suffering. Measuring this mental process against the characteristics of *yoniso* reasoning, there is certainly a requirement of factual accuracy. Moreover, well-connected reasoning is required both to obtain these facts and to ensure that we are suitably responsive to the facts we have gathered.

Given that these two activities of observing (*samanupassanā*) have already been established across the suttas about self, one might wonder why the *Samyoga Sutta* does not make use of this framework and opts to rely on rational and irrational *manasi-kāras* instead. But we see in the *Sabbāsava Sutta* that these might actually be different ways of talking about the same two processes. The sutta begins by discussing how afflictions (*āsavā*) are eliminated ‘by way of sight’ (*dassanā*). In Pāli, the verb ‘see’ is suppletive,¹⁴² taking the verb root *pas* in imperfective forms (‘look’; ‘observe’) and the root *das* in perfective forms (‘see’).¹⁴³

¹⁴² As Deshpande notes, this suppletive relationship seems to emerge in late *R̥g Veda* (28).

¹⁴³ See Deshpande 42: ‘...the relationship between *paśya* and *drś* was initially like the relationship between “look, serve” (imperfective) and “see” (perfective). For instance, one can say that he looked, but did not see X. However one cannot say one saw X, but did not look.’

The *Sabbāsava Sutta*'s use of the complementary verb root to 'observing' (*passanā*) and the similar mention of a relation of these mental activities to afflictions and their elimination suggests that the *Sabbāsava Sutta* is talking about the same mental activities, albeit with slight adjustments. So where the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* distinguishes between two kinds of 'observing' (*samanupassanā*), of which one succeeds and the other fails in grasping things according to what is real and true, the *Sabbāsava Sutta* distinguishes between 'sight' (*dassana*)—a complete and accurate seeing of things as they are—as a success case, and the absence of this kind of 'sight' as the failure case. Here, it might be best to translate *dassana* as 'perfected sight' or 'insight'.

The sutta explains that perfected sight is the domain of rational *manasi-kāras*, and the lack of perfected sight is the domain of irrational *manasi-kāras*. Moreover, just as the suttas about self relate the two kinds of observing to self-identification and the absence of self-identification, the sutta describes how irrational *manasi-kāras* encourage fettering (*saṃyojana*) to self-identification view (*sakkāya*), and how rational *manasi-kāras* enable the elimination of such fetters. Thus, there are several indications in the *Sabbāsava Sutta* that when suttas about self discuss observing something through self, what occurs on a technical level is that the individual is irrationally *manasi karoti*-ing something by imputing their own false beliefs about self upon this thing. And when the suttas discuss observing something according to what is real and true, what occurs on a technical level is that we are rationally *manasi karoti*-ing this thing.

Indeed, the sutta proceeds to provide the habitual activity of self-identification (*sakkāya*) as a paradigm example of irrational *manasi-kāra*:

This is how he *manasi karoti*-s irrationally: "Did I exist in the past? Did I not exist in the past? What was I in the past? What is the way that I was in the past? Having been what in the past, what did I then become in the past? Will I exist in the future? Will I not exist in the future? What will I be in the future? What is the way that I will be in the future? Having

been what in the future, what will I then become in the future?” Or they are undecided about what is internal to self at the present moment: “Am I? Am I not? What am I? What is the way that I am? From where has this being come to be me; to where will it be going?”

so evaṃ ayoniso manasi karoti: ‘ahosiṃ nu kho ahaṃ atītam addhānaṃ? na nu kho ahosiṃ atītam addhānaṃ? kiṃ nu kho ahosiṃ atītam addhānaṃ? kathaṃ nu kho ahosiṃ atītam addhānaṃ? kiṃ hutvā kiṃ ahosiṃ nu kho ahaṃ atītam addhānaṃ? bhavissāmi nu kho ahaṃ anāgatam addhānaṃ? na nu kho bhavissāmi anāgatam addhānaṃ? kiṃ nu kho bhavissāmi anāgatam addhānaṃ? kathaṃ nu kho bhavissāmi anāgatam addhānaṃ? kiṃ hutvā kiṃ bhavissāmi nu kho ahaṃ anāgatam addhānaṃ? etarahi vā paccuppannam addhānaṃ ajjhattaṃ kathaṃkathā hoti: ‘ahaṃ nu kho ‘smi? no nu khosmi? kiṃ nu kho ‘smi? kathaṃ nu kho ‘smi? ayaṃ nu kho satto kuto āgato? so kuhiṃ gāmi bhavissati’ iti? (MN 2)

In the earlier example of Vacchagotta asking the Buddha a question about those who had ceased I-making and mine-making entirely, his question was criticised because it assumed that there was some individual that persists after the cessation of I-making and mine-making. In asking this question, Vacchagotta revealed that he himself was guilty of assuming the presence of some self that would persist even after the successful cessation of any and all activities of I-making and mine-making. Similarly, this *manasi-kāra* about the self involves a series of questions that are based on incorrect premises, revealing how deeply ingrained this unjustified view of self lies within us. Here, the thing being *manasi-kāra*-ed is the thought of an ‘I’ (*ahaṃ*), and the thinker’s *manasi-kāra* involves posing a series of questions about it, presumably with the aim of directing their mental efforts towards obtaining answers to these questions. When we analyse this *manasi-kāra* of the ‘I’, we see that the questions posed about this ‘I’ fall into three main groups: questions

about a present 'I'; questions about a past 'I'; and questions about a future 'I'. These questions are identical, and can be formulated as such:

THE MAN *MANASI KAROTI-S* THE 'I' = The man directs his mind to answer the following questions about 'I' in the past, present, *and* future: (1) Do 'I' exist or not exist at time *t*? (2) What am 'I' at time *t*? (3) What is the way that 'I' am at time *t*? (4) Having been the 'I' at time *t*, what shall 'I' subsequently become?

For each of these questions, the thinker is directing their mental efforts towards obtaining answers about the following aspects of this 'I':

(1) Do 'I' exist (*asmi*) or not exist at time *t*? How far into the past can I investigate until 'I was' becomes 'I was not'; how long will I persist until 'I will be' becomes 'I will not be'?

(2) What (*kim*) am 'I' at time *t*? What are the characteristics of each temporal state of 'I'?

(3) What is the way (*katham*) that 'I' am at time *t*? In what sense is the 'I' that is *manasi karoti-ing* now also the 'I' that was or will be at time *t*?

(4) Having been the 'I' at time *t*, what shall 'I' become? What did 'I' do in the past to bring about the 'me' of today? What shall 'I' do now to bring about the 'me' of the future?

There are a few things to observe about the questions being asked here. First, this very habitual activity of *manasi karoti-ing* the 'I' is an exercise in establishing the self. When the individual poses question (1), they are aiming to draw a boundary between what the 'I' is—e.g., the child in the past, the adult in the present, the elderly person in the future—and what the 'I' is not—e.g., the cadaver in the distant future. When they pose question (2), they are aiming to determine the

characteristics of this ‘I’—e.g., past-‘I’ was a baby who babbled and rejected solid food, present-‘I’ is an adult who communicates with words and eats solid food. When they pose question (3), they are trying to establish the manner in which the ‘I’ exists across time—e.g., the babbling baby and the language-using adult are both me, for ‘I’ am the same in such and such a way. And when they pose question (4), they are trying to identify the ways in which the ‘I’ acts agentially over its subsequent states—e.g., since past-‘I’ desired health, past-‘I’ exercised a lot, and it is because of the actions that past-‘I’ took that I am currently experiencing health.

However, just like the Vacchagotta example earlier, every one of these questions is loaded with presuppositions about what the ‘I’ is like and what the ‘I’ is capable of being. Question (1) presupposes an idea of what the ‘I’ is and that the ‘I’ exists at a particular time—here, we are already presuming some notion of ‘self’ and ‘not-self’. Question (2) presupposes that this ‘I’ is something capable of bearing characteristics, allowing for questions about which characteristics it has—here, we impose the categories of ‘internal to self’ and ‘belonging to self’ upon the identified characteristics. Question (3) presupposes that there is such a thing as a persisting ‘I’ and asks about the manner of its sameness over time—here, the text elaborates that we falsely assume that ‘the self is enduring’ (*attā nicca*). And question (4) presupposes that it makes sense to attribute our own past, current, and future states to some earlier choice or action on our parts—overestimating our own agency and ignoring all the ways that these states are conditioned by factors outside of our control. Thus, the *Sabbāsava Sutta* provides us with an example of a *manasi-kāra* where our attention to this idea of an ‘I’ is irrational because it involves inaccurate presuppositions regarding the ‘I’.

This is direct evidence that erroneous *manasi-kāras* are acknowledged within the suttas, and specifically that erroneous *manasi-kāras* are centrally involved in the process of establishing

and becoming psychologically fettered to self. Based on the above examples, I suggest the following definition for *manasi-kāra*:

Manasi-kāra. When one *manasi karoti*-s some *X*, this means that they are mentally generating a cognitive object, *X*. This cognitive object is generated (a) based on their attention to some real object, *Y*, and (b) by applying labels (*aññā*) accompanied by reflection (*vitakka*) to this real object of attention.

To recall the line from the *Kolita Sutta*, this means that when ‘labels accompanied by reflection beset me due to *manasi-kāra*’,¹⁴⁴ it is possible that the negative attitude implied by the verb ‘beset’ comes from the dangers of adopting inaccurate labels and reflections. Such inaccuracies would certainly compromise our ability to see what we are attending to in accordance with what is real and true, resulting in a misleading cognitive object that fails to accurately grasp the actual object of attention.¹⁴⁵ This, then, is how *yoniso* and *ayoniso manasi-kāras* should be understood:

Yoniso manasi-kāra. If, when the above process occurs, (i) the labels applied are factually accurate and (ii) the reflections accompanying these labels display well-connected reasoning, the *manasi-kāra* is **rational** and results in insight.

Ayoniso manasi-kāra. If, when the above process occurs, (i) the labels applied are factually inaccurate or (ii) the reflections accompanying these labels display disconnected reasoning, the *manasi-kāra* is **irrational** and results in affliction.

Thus, just as Cabezón identified that ‘conceive’ (*rtog*) and ‘imagine’ (*brtags*) can have negative connotations because these mental activities tend to involve misconceptions, just so does serious attention need to be given to the possibility that the majority of our mental generations (*manasi-*

¹⁴⁴ SN 21.1: *vitakka-sahagatā saññā manasi-kārā samudācaranti.*

¹⁴⁵ Thus, it is not that there is some fault in the worldly object we are attending to—rather, the fault lies entirely in our inaccurate packaging and presentation of this object to our minds.

kāras) are irrational and involve misconceptions. Moreover, the fact that the erroneous *manasi-kāra* in the *Sabbāsava Sutta* results in a fettering to self and self-identification makes it even more relevant to the *Samyoga Sutta*, where irrational *manasi-kāras* are similarly portrayed as resulting in a fettering to gendered selves and gendered self-identification.

But where the *Samyoga Sutta* is concerned, the focus on formulating a view of *gendered* self means that of the long list of questions that are asked in the *Sabbāsava Sutta*, the *manasi-kāras* in the *Samyoga Sutta* are specifically concerned with answering one of these questions: ‘What am I?’ (*kiṃ nu kho ‘smi*). In doing so, they mentally generate a series of cognitive objects that appear to answer this question. For example, section [ii] of the sutta describes a woman who *manasi-kāras* what is *indriya* over woman:

[ii] Fettering to ‘Woman’ as Self. “Mendicants, a woman mentally generates (*manasi karoti*) as internal to self what is *indriya* over ‘woman’—behaviour belonging to ‘woman’, attire belonging to ‘woman’, thinking belonging to ‘woman’, desire belonging to ‘woman’, voice belonging to ‘woman’, adornment belonging to ‘woman’. She becomes attached to that and indulges in that.

itthī, bhikkhave, ajjhataṃ itth-indriyaṃ manasi karoti—itthi-kuttaṃ itth-ākappaṃ itthi-vidhaṃ itth-icchandaṃ itthi-ssaraṃ itth-ālāṅkāraṃ. sā tattha rajjati tatra abhiraṃati.

In this case, one attends to the following real features: behaviour, attire, thinking, desire, voice, adornment. When these features are generated into a corresponding cognitive object, the individual applies two labels to each of these features. Firstly, each of these features is identified as belonging to ‘woman’—when she attends to a certain voice, she labels this as belonging to ‘woman’; when she attends to a certain behaviour, she labels this as belonging to ‘woman’; when she attends to a bangle, she labels this piece of adornment as belonging to ‘woman’. In doing so, she ends up with

a series of cognitions of “womanly” features.¹⁴⁶ Secondly, she further labels these “womanly” features as internal to self.

It is these *manasi-kāras* that are *indriya* or most powerful over the ‘woman self’, for with these labels come self-making reflections based on these labels. These manifest as the same psychological progression we saw in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*: “this is mine, I am this, this is my self” (*MN 2: etaṃ mama, eso ‘ham asmi, eso me attā*). In this case, she reflects that ‘these womanly features are mine’, which progresses to a reflection that ‘I am a woman’, which progresses further to a conviction that she has a ‘woman self’.

And the reflections do not stop there. Having become attached to her woman self, the woman begins to impose her ideas of what ‘woman’ means upon other worldly features. When she attends to things that are suitably similar to what she has previously deemed as belonging to ‘woman’, she gives these features the same label. But when she attends to instances of deportment, behaviour, attire, etc., that do not match with her existing conception of what belongs to ‘woman’, she mentally generates these as belonging to ‘not-woman’ or ‘man’. Thus, section [iii] of the sutta describes the woman (a) mentally generating what is *indriya* or powerful over the notion of ‘man’, and (b) mentally generating all of these as ‘external’ to self:

[iii] Fettering to ‘Man’ as Not-Self. “Having become attached to that and having indulged in that, she mentally generates as external [to self] (*bahiddhā*) what is *indriya* over ‘man’—behaviour belonging to ‘man’, attire belonging to ‘man’, thinking belonging to ‘man’, desire belonging to ‘man’, voice belonging to ‘man’, adornment belonging to ‘man’. She becomes attached to that and indulges in that.

¹⁴⁶ Like the *Samyoga Sutta*, which advises individuals not to inaccurately *manasi-kārā* features as gendered, the *Anaṅgaṇa Sutta* advises individuals not to *manasi-kārā* features as beautiful and not to take ugliness as beauty – such labels are inaccurate, and the misconceptions behind them are occasionally corrected in very dramatic and gory ways. For example, see *Therīgāthā* 14.1, where a man harrasses a nun in the forest and praises the beauty of her eyes, and the nun responds by saying there is nothing beautiful about an eye, which is just different parts of the eye that are balled together (*piṇḍitā*). She proceeds to rip out her eye and give it to the man, who immediately loses his attraction to the detached eyeball in his hand.

sā tattha rattā tatra abhiratā bahiddhā puris-indriyaṃ manasi karoti—purisa-kuttaṃ purisākappaṃ purisa-vidhaṃ purisa-cchandaṃ purisa-ssaraṃ puris-ālaṅkāraṃ. sā tattha rajjati tatra abhiramati.

Attending to a voice that does not fit her own conception of a womanly voice, she labels this as belonging to ‘man’; attending to a behaviour that does not fit into her conception of womanly behaviour, she labels this as belonging to ‘man’; attending to an adornment that does not fit into her conception of womanly adornment, she labels this as belonging to ‘man’. Moreover, because of her conviction in her identity as a woman, these “manly” features are then labelled as external to her self.

It might seem as if her main activity here involves denouncing the relevance of these “manly” features to her, but this *manasi-kāra* is crucial to the woman’s eventual fettering to her ‘woman self’. Indeed, the sutta repeats the exact same reflection when it comes to these features: ‘She becomes attached to that and indulges in that.’ For in reflecting that ‘these manly features are not mine’, she further defines for herself what ‘womanly’ features are and are not, reinforcing the belief that certain behaviours, desires, clothing, adornments, etc., are appropriately hers, and other behaviours, desires, adornments, etc., are not to be performed or felt or worn by her.

And when she proceeds to reflect based on this that ‘I am not a man’, she becomes more deeply locked into her understanding of her identity as a woman who is fundamentally different from a man in all the ways described above. Thus, the more that she becomes attached to labelling and reflecting on these ‘manly’ features, the more robust and rigid and defined her ‘woman self’ becomes. And it is only at this juncture of having become attached both to her ‘woman self’ and to the notion of ‘man’ as external to that self that the section concludes: ‘In this way, mendicants, a woman does not escape the ‘woman self’.’

Finally, just as in other suttas about the self, the proposed method of rectifying these irrational *manasi-kāra* and escaping or transcending (*ativattati*) the gendered self is to learn to identify all the inaccuracies in our labels and the disconnects in our reflections. When the individual is successful in this endeavour and is able to see these features as they really exist—fleeting material forms, sensations, mental states, etc. that are incapable of belonging to anything or being internal to any self—they will no longer *manasi karoti* these features as belonging to some notion of gender or as internal to some non-existent self:

[vii] Unfettering from ‘Woman’ as Self. “Mendicants, a woman does not mentally generate (*manasi karoti*) as internal to self (*ajjhatta*) what is *indriya* over ‘woman’—behaviour belonging to ‘woman’, attire belonging to ‘woman’, thinking belonging to ‘woman’, desire belonging to ‘woman’, voice belonging to ‘woman’, adornment belonging to ‘woman’. She does not become attached to that and does not indulge in that.

itthī, bhikkhave, ajjhattaṃ itth-indriyaṃ na manasi karoti—itthi-kuttaṃ itth-ākappaṃ itthi-vidhaṃ itthi-cchandaṃ itthi-ssaraṃ itth-ālankāraṃ. sā tattha na rajjati, sā tatra na abhiramati.

[viii] Unfettering from ‘Man’ as Not-Self. “Having not become attached to that and having not indulged in that, she does not mentally generate what is *indriya* over ‘man’ as external [to self]—behaviour belonging to ‘man’, attire belonging to ‘man’, thinking belonging to ‘man’, desire belonging to ‘man’, voice belonging to ‘man’, adornment belonging to ‘man’. She does not become attached to that and does not indulge in that.

sā tattha arattā tatra anabhiratā bahiddhā puris-indriyaṃ na manasi karoti—purisa-kuttaṃ puris-ākappaṃ purisa-vidhaṃ purisa-cchandaṃ purisa-ssaraṃ puris-ālankāraṃ. sā tattha na rajjati, tatra na abhiramati.

2.5 A possible loose end

I have demonstrated above that the *Sutta Piṭaka* advances a psychological account of gender, where what is most powerful or *indriya* over the gendered self is the irrational mental generations an individual makes about various features of the world. These are irrational because they involve (1) inaccurately labelling things as gendered and (2) inaccurately taking things which were labelled as belonging to one gender as self and rejecting things which were labelled as belonging to the other gender as not-self, leading one to become entirely fettered to one of the two gendered selves.

Returning to Cabezón's description of the distinction between *presumptive* and *theoretical* discussions of gender, I believe that the *Samyoga Sutta*'s psychological account of the mental generation of binary gender categories should qualify as a theoretical discussion of gender. As Cabezón describes the features of theoretical gender speculation:

theoretical gender speculation is a systematic, second-order analysis that shows greater self-awareness of gender as a category, on occasion even offering justification for why the norms are what they are.¹⁴⁷

In the suttas, we are provided with systematic accounts of self-identification (*sakkaya*), mental generation (*manasi-kāra*), and irrational (*ayoni*) reasoning. And rather than presuming or implying the reality of gender identity as Cabezón asserts, the *Samyoga Sutta* synthesises all of these accounts in order to explain how someone's mental activity of attending to something as simple as a shiny gold adornment (*ālaṅkāra*) or a voice of a certain cadence progressively snowballs into a deep and irrational conviction in their own real identity as a 'woman self' or 'man self'. Based on this, I think it is fair to conclude that the account that emerges from reading the *Samyoga Sutta* intertextually with the rest of the suttas about self demonstrates 'systematic, second-order

¹⁴⁷ Cabezón 384.

analysis'. Moreover, a psychological justification is provided for 'why the norms are what they are'—they are this way because we have psychologically constructed them based on inaccurate labels and reflections.

However, and in reference to the question of why the norms are what they are, the account of gender in the Pāli Suttas does leave one question unanswered. For the *Samyoga Sutta* provides a detailed explanation of how the 'woman self' and 'man self' are irrationally generated in reference to and in opposition with each other, but at no point does it offer an explanation of why we were initially inclined to label some group of things as belonging to a certain gender. Was my labelling of a certain voice type or adornment type as belonging to 'woman' something that happened entirely at random? Or is there some explanation, whether it be psychological or sociological or material, for why we created the specific gender norms that we did as opposed to some other permutation of norms?

This question became a major concern for a group of Abhidharma Buddhist philosophers known as the Vaibhāṣikas, who argued that some kind of metaphysical explanation was necessary for explaining why we differentiated these features in the ways that we did. In my final chapter, I will survey how the psychological account of gender initially established in the Pāli Suttas was received and transformed into a materialist account within the Abhidharma Buddhist tradition.

Chapter 3 Two Abhidharma Accounts of the Metaphysics of Gender

3.1 Vasubandhu and the Vaibhāṣikas

The previous chapters featured works from early Buddhism, and specifically the period of pre-sectarian Buddhism. Willemen et al. speak of this as the first intellectual period of Buddhism, which ‘includes texts that are attributed to the immediate disciples of the Buddha, adopt a *sūtra* format with an accompanying gloss, present relatively simple taxonomies and explanations that do not deviate significantly from those of the *sūtras*, and give no indication of having rival opinions or doctrinal factionalism’.¹⁴⁸ In this chapter, I move ahead to what they discuss as the fourth intellectual period of Buddhism. As an indicator of how much later in history this period is, the *Sutta Piṭaka* is theorised to have been composed around 5th century BCE, and Vasubandhu, the author of the text I will be focusing on in this chapter, was said to have been born in 4th century CE.

By this fourth period of Buddhist thought, many different Buddhist traditions and schools had emerged, each with their own extensive collections of canonical texts and commentaries, and each concerned with defending their own interpretations of the Buddha’s words against other schools and traditions. Across these schools, there was a shared commitment to the claims made across the suttas about the soteriological importance of understanding the nature of all things as conditioned, dependent, impermanent, and bound towards annihilation. Nonetheless, each tradition or school proceeded to take different stances regarding the metaphysical implications of

¹⁴⁸ Willemen et al. 171.

these claims, kicking off a lively debate among classical Buddhists scholars about the viability of each of their accounts.¹⁴⁹ Thus, Willemen et al. note that fourth period texts tend to be ‘dialectical, expository treatises or summary, pedagogical digests... [that] employ explicit and sophisticated methods of argumentation to establish the position of their own school and refute at length the views of others.’¹⁵⁰

One of these traditions is the Abhidharma tradition,¹⁵¹ which encompasses multiple Buddhist schools such as the Sarvāstivāda school (‘the view that all exists’¹⁵²), a group of Sarvāstivādins known as the Vaibhāṣikas (‘followers of the *Vibhāṣā*’),¹⁵³ and the Sautrāntika school (‘followers of the suttas’). In Abhidharma, the *dhammas* that were mentioned in the suttas as basic mental and material states became a main topic of interest. Since the suttas associated the perfected seeing of these *dhammas* with knowledge of reality,¹⁵⁴ Abhidharma scholars became

¹⁴⁹ And according to various Buddhist texts and biographies, the relationship between these different schools and thinkers was not always courteous. The Abhidharma Vaibhāṣika scholar Saṅghabhadra dismissed the Buddhist Mādyamikas by calling them destructive Vaināśikas (‘annihilationists’) instead of using their proper name. (*Nyāyānusāra* ADCP.28; SA.IV.60). Another story from Xuánzàng’s biography reports that Vasubandhu and Saṅghabhadra were both students of the Vaibhāṣika scholar, Skandhila (Pereira and Tiso 452). Vasubandhu ended up abandoning and criticising his teacher’s school in his influential *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya*, and Saṅghabhadra responded by spending twelve years of his life composing treatises in defence of Vaibhāṣika (Beal 193). When Saṅghabhadra finally tracked down Vasubandhu and travelled to the country of Chêka to debate him, Vasubandhu heard news of his approach and promptly left the country. Saṅghabhadra died without ever getting to debate his rival (Beal 194). For an extreme example of antagonism, Tārānātha claims that when Dharmakīrti finished writing the *Pramāṇavārttika*, his enemies ‘tied up the leaves of his work to the tail of a dog and let him run through the streets where the leaves became scattered’. Dharmakīrti is reported to have said the following in response: ‘just as this dog runs through all streets, so will my work be spread in all the world’ (Scherbatsky 36).

¹⁵⁰ Willemen et al. 175.

¹⁵¹ See *AKBh* I.2 for Vasubandhu’s explanation of the three meanings of the term ‘Abhidharma’. Also see Cox for her account of the different explanations found in various Abhidharma texts: ‘Scholarly opinion has generally been divided between two options, both of which find ample support in extant canonical materials. These options hinge upon the interpretation of the prefix *abhi*: (1) *abhi* as *uttama* “highest” or “further,” and *dharma* as “teaching” or “doctrine;” and (2) *abhi* as “with regard to,” and *dharma* as “teaching” or “doctrine.” Though the first interpretation as “highest” or “further” is preferred by later Pāli commentators, the second interpretation as “with regard to the teaching” comes to represent the northern Indian Buddhist understanding of the term’ (*Disputed Dharmas* 3).

¹⁵² See *Kathā-vatthu* I.6. Also see Cox: ‘Specifically, Saṅghabhadra characterized the orthodox Kāśmīra Sarvāstivādins as maintaining that factors exist as real entities in the three time periods of past, present, and future. Vasubandhu and the Dārṣṭāntikas before him, rejected this assertion and maintained that many of the factors isolated by the Sarvāstivādins do not exist as real entities (*dravya*), but rather exist simply as provisional designations (*prajñapti*).’ (*Disputed Dharmas* xxii)

¹⁵³ They were known by this name because of their adherence to a core text called the *Māha-vibhāṣā* (‘Great Compendium’), which I will discuss later in this chapter. Cf. Vidyābhūṣaṇa 247: ‘*Vibhāṣā* means “commentary,” and the *Vaibhāṣika* philosophy seems to have been so called because it was based on the commentaries rather than on the original texts of the teachings of Buddha.’

¹⁵⁴ For example, see Gethin’s explanation of how *MN* 28 was interpreted in commentarial literature: ‘In the Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta Sāriputta attributes the saying to the Buddha: ‘He who sees dependent arising sees *dhamma*; he who sees *dhamma* sees

primarily interested in the discernment (*pravicaya*) of these *dhammas*.¹⁵⁵ As Gethin notes, their efforts were specifically directed towards determining the ‘precise sense those mental and physical qualities should be said to exist’.¹⁵⁶ In this text, I rely on Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya* (*Commentary on the Treasury of the Abhidharma*) in order to introduce two competing Abhidharma accounts of gender.

Regarding the *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya*, Willemen et al. note that for the later Buddhist tradition, this one text ‘ultimately overshadowed all others to the point that it became tantamount to Abhidharma’. Indeed, Vasubandhu himself was a particularly interesting figure. After his ordination, he received his training from Vaibhāṣika masters who were members of the orthodox Sarvāstivāda school. Thus, Vasubandhu’s first big contribution to classical Buddhist thought was the *Abhidharma-kośa* (*Treasury of the Abhidharma*), a text that summarises all the main views and beliefs of the Vaibhāṣikas in verse form. He was said to have become disenchanted with the Vaibhāṣika view, however, and composed the *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya* as his second major work. This text is an auto-commentary on the *Abhidharma-kośa* which not only extensively explains all of these Vaibhāṣika views but raises objections and alternative accounts from a variety of rival Buddhist schools and thinkers. Moreover, Vasubandhu dedicated extensive parts of his commentary to constructing his own alternative accounts to the Vaibhāṣika ones, declaring these views to be Sautrāntika views. Then in his works after the *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya*, he abandoned

dependent arising.’ The text goes on to explain that the five aggregates of attachment have arisen dependently (*paṭicca-samuppanna*). The commentary glosses the Buddha’s saying as ‘he who sees causal conditions, sees dependently arisen *dhammas*’ (“He Who Sees Dhamma Sees Dhammas” 536).

¹⁵⁵ See *AKBh* I.4. Also see Cox: ‘Analysis, or, in particular, the buddhistically informed analysis of experience into its ultimate constituent factors (*dharma*), is the hallmark of all Abhidharma thought. The manner of existence of all constituent factors and the existential status of particular factors became fundamental issues that underlie and direct the often doctrinally specific discussions in Abhidharma treatises. These ontological issues also shaped the differences demarcating different sectarian groups and schools.’ (*Disputed Dharmas* xxii)

¹⁵⁶ Gethin: ‘That *dhammas* are mental and physical qualities is one thing; in what precise sense those mental and physical qualities should be said to exist is quite another. Thus the issue of what precisely *dhammas/dharmas* are is one that is debated and discussed by the later schools—the Vibhajjavāda, the Sarvāstivāda, the Madhyamaka’ (“He Who Sees Dhammas Sees Dhammas” 537).

Abhidharma entirely, becoming a prominent scholar of the Mahāyāna tradition instead. Of the two major Abhidharma views of gender that I will discuss in this chapter, one is the Vaibhāṣika's materialist view of the *indriyas* over gender and the other is Vasubandhu's own materialist view of these same *indriyas*.

In the current literature on the Abhidharma views of gender, Vasubandhu and the Vaibhāṣikas have not been discussed as having separate views of gender. According to Cabezón, apart from a few cosmological disputes about the specific reason why genitals do not exist in the form-realm, Vasubandhu fully endorses the Vaibhāṣika metaphysics of gender. Discussing the *indriyas* over gender as 'sex faculties', Cabezón explains:

For Abhidharmists in general, the sex faculties are distinct from people's nature as male and female. The male and female faculties are subtle forms of "derived," clear matter belonging to the so-called body faculty, the sense faculty responsible for the sensation of touch. The implication seems to be that the sex faculties experience a particular form of touch sensation, that related to sex. Both the body faculty and that portion of the body faculty known as the male or female faculty are tiny bits of matter.¹⁵⁷

I agree with Cabezón's characterisation of this general Abhidharma view of the *indriyas* over gender. It is, however, a notable enough deviation from the psychological view of the *indriyas* over gender in the suttas that I spend a section of the chapter explaining how the view that the *indriyas* over gender are material emerged as the orthodox Abhidharma view. In this section, I introduce a third period text known as the *Mahā-vibhāṣā* ('*Great Compendium*'), dated around 150 CE.¹⁵⁸ In this text, we see a variety of metaphysical accounts of the *indriyas* over gender, of

¹⁵⁷ Cabezón 414.

¹⁵⁸ See Potter: 'The *Mahāvibhāṣā* is a massive sourcebook of Sarvāstivādin doctrine, compiled according to tradition in the first half of the second century A.D. at the time of the third sectarian council convened in Kashmir under the sponsorship of King Kaniṣka... Taiken Kimura, however, first demonstrated that such references in the *Mahāvibhāṣā* as "In the past, at the time of

which only one was fully committed not only to the materiality of the *indriyas* over gender, but also to subsuming them under a material *indriya* over touch. By the time of fourth period Buddhism, this view had emerged as the orthodox view, becoming entirely synonymous with Abhidharma Sarvāstivāda. Thus, both Vasubandhu and the Vaibhāṣikas followed the interpretation that *indriyas* over gender were material in the exact way that Cabezón describes above.

Cabezón claims of both Vasubandhu and the Vaibhāṣikas that they shared the following view:

the male and female faculties are responsible for everything that makes people male and female: for their sexual anatomy, gender, sexual pleasure, and if the commentators are right, even for their -(hetero)sexual desires. Human beings who possess the female faculty—the tiny hollow--drum particles—are destined to possess only one set of sex organs, female ones; to have certain fixed secondary sexual characteristics like breasts; to have only one gendered nature (speaking, acting, moving, and thinking in stereotypically female ways); to desire men; and to experience female sexual pleasure—and, *mutatis mutandis*, for beings who possess the male faculty.¹⁵⁹

Against Cabezón, I argue that this is where the similarity between views ended. The Vaibhāṣikas saw no problems with treating these material *indriyas* as being powerful over gender in all the ways above, thereby attributing a variety of powers to the collection of atoms that constitute the *indriyas* over gender. Vasubandhu, however, was deeply troubled by this position. First, he did not think that *collections* of atoms could be real things, and disputed the Vaibhāṣika view on this front. Second, he did not even think that atoms could be ‘powerful’ in any active sense, proposing a passive and indirect view of non-obstructing causation instead. Third, he dissolves the notion of

Kaniṣka", show that the text had to have been composed later than Kaniṣka's time. He suggests that the text probably dates from sometime between the reign of Kaniṣka and the advent of Nāgārjuna, or ca. 150 A.D.’ (112)

¹⁵⁹ Cabezón 415.

an *indriya* being ‘powerful’, instead redefining *indriya* as referring to our identification of a selection of atoms that existed prior to the arising of some biological attributes. And finally, even as he inherited the Abhidharma view of materialist *indriyas* over gender, he was troubled by the notion that material atoms could be *indriya* or most powerful over mental activities like seeing, sensation, conceptual distinctions, and self-making.

Vasubandhu therefore had a more limited view of the ‘power’ and the scope of the *indriyas* over gender, a view according to which these *indriyas* are not *indriyas* over gender at all. Where the Vaibhāṣikas held a unified materialist view of the *indriyas* over gender, I will show that Vasubandhu’s own account is dual. He attributes biological sex to material *indriyas* over sex and gendered behaviour to consciousness or mind (*viññāna*). This, then, might possibly mark the first emergence of a distinction between conceptually invented gender and material biological sex in the classical South Asian Buddhist tradition.

3.2 Metaphysical eliminativism: from *dhamma* to *dharma*

Abhidharma philosophers appear to have drawn upon several analogies from the suttas and commentaries in their attempt to articulate the sense in which *dhammas* exist. One of these analogies was that of a chariot, which appears in the *Vajirā Sutta* (SN 5.10) and features in Theravādin texts like the *Milinda-pañha* (Mil 3.1.1). In the *Vajirā Sutta*, the nun Vajirā explains that a chariot (*ratha*) is only a ‘noise’ (*saddo*) that we use to denote a bunch of ‘assembled parts’ (*aṅga-sambhārā*). She proceeds to compare this to a sentient being (*satta*), which she claims is merely a ‘common consensus’ (*sammuti*) that we share. In actuality, ‘no sentient being is found here’ (*nay idha satt’ upalabbhati*) because there is ‘nothing but a heap of conditions’ (*suddha-saṅkhāra-puñjayaṃ*).

From the claim that most of the things we believe to be real exist only in virtue of ‘noises’ that in turn are only meaningful by virtue of ‘common consensus’, Abhidharma philosophers established a metaphysical category for ‘conceptual designations’ (*prajñaptis*), contrasting them with the ‘fundamental entities’ (*dravyas*) upon which we base our conceptual designations. Occasionally, this is framed as a distinction between what is ‘conventionally real’ (*saṃvṛti-sat*) and what is ‘ultimately real’ (*paramârtha-sat*). Influenced by the strategy of explaining away sentient beings, chariots, etc., by appealing to their more fundamental parts, the Ābhidharmikas adopted a similar principle in order to determine what it meant for *dhammas* to be metaphysically basic. As the Abhidharma philosopher Vasubandhu summarises this eliminativist principle¹⁶⁰ in verse form:

When broken, there is no cognition of that;

When distinguished by the mind, there is also [no cognition of] that.

That which is like the pot and water is conventionally real;

That which is otherwise is ultimately real.

yatra bhinne na¹⁶¹ tad-buddhir

anyâpohe dhiyâ ca tat.

ghaṭâmbuvat saṃvṛti-sat

paramârtha-sad anyathâ. (AK VI.4)

Provided here are two versions of the eliminativist principle, with one targeting physical reducibility (‘when broken’) and the other targeting conceptual distinguishability (‘when excluded

¹⁶⁰ Carpenter with Ngaserin, which centres around Vasubandhu’s atomist arguments, characterises AK VI.4 as an atomist principle that targets physical and conceptual divisibility. We do so because this is indeed the way that Vasubandhu interprets the principle as a Sautrântika. The reason why I characterise this as an eliminativist principle here is because only the Sautrântikas interpret this principle as an atomist one. As I will discuss below, the Vaibhâṣikas did not interpret this principle in the same way. Unlike Vasubandhu, they were more than willing to include divisible things like aggregates (*skandhas*), particles (*paramâṇu*) and *indriyas* in their list of fundamental entities (*dravya*).

¹⁶¹ I have emended Pradhan’s instrumental ‘*bhinnena*’ to a locative absolute and negation, ‘*bhinne na*’.

by the mind’). He proceeds to use a pot (*ghaṭa*) as a paradigm example for physical eliminativism and water (*ambu*) as an example for mental eliminativism. With regard to physical eliminativism, he explains:

That is conventionally real which, when broken into parts, no cognition of it arises. It is like the example of the pot.¹⁶² There, when it is broken into shards, the cognition “pot” no longer arises.

yasminn avayavaśo bhinne na tad-buddhir bhavati tat samvṛti-sat. tad yathā ghaṭaḥ. tatra hi kapālaśo bhinne ghaṭa-buddhir na bhavati. (AKBh VI.4)

When Vasubandhu notes that what he is discussing as physical eliminativism is ‘like the example of the pot’, he is referencing a prominent analogy that the suttas draw between the body and a clay pot.¹⁶³ We see one iteration of this analogy in a passage of the *Parivīmaṃsana Sutta*. According to this sutta, the anxiety I feel about the eventual death of the body (*kāya-pariyantika*) comes from an inaccurate understanding of what a body is. When we have the right account of what a body is, we are able to see that the ‘death’ of the body is actually just a ‘breaking of the body’ (*kāyassa bheda*).

The sutta explains the difference between thinking of the body as ‘dead’ and as ‘broken’ by drawing an analogy to a pot (*kumbha*) which breaks into shards (*kapallāni*) when it is left to

¹⁶² Sangpo opts to translate *ghaṭa* as ‘pitcher’ and not ‘pot’, possibly because it would neatly tie the two examples about physically reducible *ghaṭa* (‘pot’; ‘pitcher’) and conceptually reducible *ambu* (‘water’) together. Indeed, one could imagine a pitcher of water falling to the floor, causing the pitcher to break and water to spill out. However, I think it is best to avoid ‘pitcher’ because it might be wrongly assumed that Vasubandhu is referring readers to the sutta passages which discuss the analogy of water in a water pitcher (see *SN* 45.153; *AN* 3.30, etc.), which has nothing to do with this discussion about physical reductionism. Indeed, the analogy of water in a water pitcher is consistently used to explain proper application of the mind—just as a water pitcher is capable of pouring out or retaining water, the mind can be trained to ‘pour out’ inaccurate, unskilful contents (*SN* 45.153) while retaining accurate, skilful contents (*AN* 3.30). Instead, I translate ‘pot’ to signal my view that Vasubandhu is referring to the analogy of the clay pot in the suttas.

¹⁶³ It is impossible to fully verify that this is the sutta analogy being referenced. But not only is the clay pot analogy entirely relevant to this discussion about physical reductionism, there are also too many similarities in the terminology being used across these passages for it to be coincidental. With regards to the *Parivīmaṃsana Sutta*: (1) Vasubandhu’s use of “breaking” (*bhinna*) as the criterion for physical reductionism is entirely in line with the sutta’s instruction that we should think of the “breaking” (*bheda*) of the body and the pot in order to understand them correctly; (2) Vasubandhu’s discussion of a pot breaking into shards (*kapālaśo*) replicates the sutta’s mention of pottery shards (*kapallāni*) remaining after the clay pot breaks.

dry on a level surface (*same bhūmi-bhāge*) after being fired. When we observe an intact pot at time t_1 and broken pottery shards at time t_2 , we do not think that the pot at time t_1 ‘died’ before time t_2 . Rather, we understand that uneven drying and rapidly dissipating heat caused the clay that was shaped like a pot at t_1 to break and become shaped like pottery shards at t_2 . In this sense, there is no pot that ‘dies’—broken or not, the pot has never been anything over and above the clay that we see at both t_1 and t_2 .

Likewise, one who views the body rightly knows (*pajānāti*) that ‘when the body breaks... the parts of the body remain.’¹⁶⁴ When one perfectly sees that the body is nothing more than the parts that we see at both t_1 and t_2 ,¹⁶⁵ the cognition “body” does not arise at either t_1 or t_2 , nor does the thought “the body dies” arise after t_1 —“body” is no longer an object of thought. Instead, the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* supplies that all we should cognise at both t_1 and t_2 is ‘head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, undigested food, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, snot, synovial fluid, urine’.¹⁶⁶ Thus, the only difference between t_1 and t_2 is that the body parts at t_2 have ‘broken apart’ in some sense.

In the suttas above, the focus is consistently on eliminating our attachment to those things to which we tend to form irrational attachments. For this purpose, it is useful to reduce metaphysically the things to which we tend to form strong attachments (e.g., the person, the body) to parts that we might find unappealing or disgusting (e.g., bile, pus, snot); and it is useful to reduce the things that we tend to find valuable (e.g., chariots, pots) to parts that we may find worthless

¹⁶⁴ SN 12.51: *kāyassa bheda... sarīrāni avasissanti iti pajānāti.*

¹⁶⁵ And as the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* proceeds to explain in its instructions for meditation, this means that we have to rationally attend to *all* the parts of the body, including the ‘gross’ bits like sweat and mucus and faeces. The sutta argues that it is this sort of rational attention that rids us of irrational attachment to the ‘body’. When we attend rationally, the thought of ‘body’ does not arise, nor are we afflicted with worry about the ‘death’ of this ‘body’.

¹⁶⁶ MN 10, Sujato’s translation.

(e.g., disassembled chariot parts, pottery shards). Recall that according to the *Samyoga Sutta*, we see that since our attachment was caused by our inaccurate labelling of various things as belonging to a gendered self (e.g., shape belonging to my woman self, attire belonging to my woman self), there is no need to reduce the objects of our attention (e.g., shape, attire) to their parts. Thus, in this stratum of literature, this strategy of physical reductionism was only applied as far as was soteriologically necessary for transforming our irrational attachments towards these things, and further investigation into the matter was thought to be unnecessary.¹⁶⁷

But the Ābhidharmikas were invested in seeing where this practice led. They transformed the sutta's strategy of dispelling attachment through 'breaking' into a thoroughgoing principle of physical eliminativism. To determine whether a physical object is conventionally real like the pot and the body, we are asked to imagine this physical object being broken into its parts. In this situation, does our cognition of its parts at t_2 completely replace and eliminate our initial cognition of it at t_1 ? This, Vasubandhu explains, is certainly the case for the pot: 'when it is broken into shards, the cognition "pot" no longer arises'. And the reason for this, as we saw from the *Parivāṃsa Sutta*, is that the clay pot we cognise at t_1 is nothing over and above the pottery shards we cognise at t_2 .

The Ābhidharmikas apply this principle of physical eliminativism to *every* breakable object. The analysis does not end at the pottery shards; we are further tasked to imagine the pottery shards being broken into smaller clay fragments, and subsequently to imagine the clay fragments being ground into ceramic powder, and so on and so forth. There, I am asked to notice that my cognition of 'clay fragments' exactly replaces my previous cognition of 'pottery shards', that my

¹⁶⁷ E.g., the *Sisapāvāna Sutta*, where the Buddha explains this point by grabbing a handful of leaves and comparing that handful to the sheer number of leaves in the forest. Here, the forest represents all the things that are known and could be known by us, and the handful of leaves represents the small fraction of knowable things that are actually relevant to the ending of suffering. The Buddha's advice is to stick to the handful of leaves instead of wandering aimlessly into the forest (*SN* 56.31).

subsequent cognition of ‘ceramic powder’ exactly replaces that cognition of ‘clay fragments’, etc. Anything that can be fully explained by its parts in this way is only conventionally real (*saṃvṛti-sat*), and the Ābhidharmikas characterise these physically eliminable things as mere conceptual designations (*prajñaptis*).

And they were not satisfied with stopping at things that might be difficult to physically break down with the resources they had. Ceramic powder might be tough to physically break apart, but surely that cannot be where the reductionist principle terminates. Thus, the Ābhidharmikas created a parallel principle of mental eliminativism, which Vasubandhu relays to us as such:

That should also be known as conventionally real in the case that, should it be cognitively distinguished from other *dharmas*, the cognition of it does not arise. For example, water. In this case, should it be cognitively distinguished from *dharmas* like form, etc., the cognition “water” no longer arises.

*tatra ca anyān apohya dharmān buddhyā tad-buddhir na bhavati tac ca api saṃvṛti-sad
veditavyam. tad yathā ambu. tatra hi buddhyā rūpādīn dharmān apohya ambu-buddhir na
bhavati. (AKBh VI.4)*

When our ability to break physical objects terminates and where complex thoughts are concerned, mental eliminativism continues to apply. For example, even when I do not have the resources to evaporate or boil water, I can still use a cognitive process of exclusion (*apoha*) to break it down. Starting from my cognition of ‘water’, I proceed by cognitively distinguishing ‘water’ from every *dhamma* of material form, etc., that is included in my cognition of ‘water’. And just as cognising every pottery shard replaces and eliminates the initial ‘pot’ cognition, attempting to mentally separate from my cognition of ‘water’ all the *dharmas* that are involved in that cognition of ‘water’ causes that cognition to fully disappear. Thus, things which can be eliminated by cognitive exclusion are also only conventionally real.

And just as physical eliminativism was used by the Ābhīdharmikas to thoroughly eliminate all the things that had been left uneliminated by the suttas, so was mental eliminativism used to the same effect. Returning to the analogy of the pot and the body, part of the argument that the pot and body did not ‘die’ after t_1 involves pointing out that all the pottery shards and body parts ‘remain’ (*avasissanti*)—i.e., no ‘death’ occurred because all the parts at t_1 persisted until t_2 and the only change was in the arrangement of the parts. Indeed, the suttas were not particularly concerned with the idea that things could persist over time. We see in places like the *Saṅkhatalakkhaṇa Sutta* that ‘duration’ (*ṭhiti*) was taken to be a feature of impermanent things, suggesting that things can persist for a substantial period of time before eventually perishing.¹⁶⁸ But under the principle of mental eliminativism, the Ābhīdharmikas took issue with something having temporal parts, believing that things with temporal parts could be eliminated into momentary time-slices. As von Rospatt notes, the principle that ‘everything is impermanent’¹⁶⁹ was reinterpreted by Ābhīdharmikas as the principle that ‘everything is momentary’.¹⁷⁰

Through this twofold eliminativist principle, many more things than were explicitly stated in the suttas were deemed to be mere conceptual designations (*prajñaptis*). And this instigated a new line of inquiry for the Ābhīdharmikas: if *all* of those things are mere conceptual designations, then what, if anything, is able to count as a fundamental entity? The option of nothing counting as a fundamental entity was not acceptable to the Ābhīdharmikas, so the criterion below was

¹⁶⁸ See also *AKBh* II.46b, where Vasubandhu notes that the Buddha mentions ‘duration’ (*sthiti*) as part of the marks of being conditioned (*samskṛta-lakṣaṇa*). Moreover, *Kathāvatthu* XXII.8 refutes the claim that ‘all *dhammas* are as momentary (*khanika*) as a single thought’ (*eka-citta-kkhanike sabbe dhammi ti*). So even though the momentariness of thoughts was raised and agreed upon in the *Kathāvatthu*, this did not translate into the momentariness of all things.

¹⁶⁹ von Rospatt 172.

¹⁷⁰ von Rospatt 176. He also notes that this transformation appears to be complete by the time of the *Māha-vibhāṣā*, since this is taken to be the obvious reading of the sutta’s claims about impermanence (21-2).

established with the aim of finding suitable candidates that would resist any attempts at further elimination:

Even when broken or when cognitively distinguished from other *dharmas*, the cognition of that still arises.

*yatra*¹⁷¹ *bhinne 'pi tad-buddhir bhavaty eva anya-dharmâpohe 'pi buddhyā tat paramârthasat.* (AKBh VI.4)

Here, all of the Ābhidharmikas were in complete agreement about taking *dhammas* to be fundamentally real. Moreover, they fully agreed on the specific strategy that should be taken to establish *dhammas* as fundamental entities. Since they had already been characterised as basic physical and mental states in the *suttas*, the Ābhidharmikas decided that the obvious way to fulfil this criterion is to posit that whatever these physical and mental *dhammas* are, they are entirely incapable of being physically broken or cognitively distinguished. In other words, they interpreted them as being physically and mentally non-eliminable in the specific sense of being both physically and conceptually *indivisible*. And this, the Ābhidharmikas continued, could only be possible if all *dhammas* were physically and conceptually partless. This way, the cognition of a *dhamma* would necessarily continue to arise, for there is not even the option of proceeding to cognise its physical or conceptual parts.

Ābhidharmikas rely on this understanding of *dhammas* as partless entities when they use the Sanskrit term '*dharma*'. So where the *suttas* mention understanding *dhammas* of material form (*rūpa*) in accordance with what is real and true, Vasubandhu explains that this means comprehending them as material *dharmas* or atoms that are literally ἄ-τομος ('un-cutable'; 'in-

¹⁷¹ Here, I follow Szegedi in emending Pradhan's '*tatra*' to '*yatra*' (304).

divisible’).¹⁷² And where the suttas mention understanding mental states like sensation (*vedana*), taste (*rasa*), etc., in accordance with what is real and true, the Ābhidharmikas explain that this means comprehending them as conceptually partless mental *dharmas*. As Vasubandhu explains:

For example, material form *dharmas*. Here, even when an object is broken into atoms or should it be excluded by the mind from *dharmas* like taste, etc., the cognition “intrinsic nature of material form *dharma*” still arises.¹⁷³ Sensation, etc. should also be regarded in this way.

tad yathā rūpam. tatra hi paramāṇuśo bhinne vastuni rasādīn¹⁷⁴ api ca dharmān apohya buddhyā rūpasya svabhāva-buddhir bhavaty eva. evaṃ vedanādayo 'pi draṣṭavyāḥ. (AKBh VI.4)

We can break an object into material *dharmas* or mentally exclude an object from its material *dharmas*, but we cannot do the same to these material *dharmas*. Since all material *dharmas* are indivisible, they cannot be physically broken; since they are temporally and conceptually partless, they cannot be mentally distinguished from any parts. We are told to apply this same explanation to mental *dharmas* like sensation, which ‘should also be regarded in this way’.

This is why the Ābhidharmikas became interested in identifying the ‘intrinsic nature’ (*svabhāva*) of *dharmas*.¹⁷⁵ Since the conceptual designations described above reduce to these *dharmas*, all of the characteristics that we associate with these designations must be accounted for

¹⁷² According to Vasubandhu, the Vaibhāṣikas interpret *rūpa* as aggregates of *dharmas* instead. This will be addressed later in the chapter (AKBh I.20).

¹⁷³ Again, note that the Vaibhāṣika account of this differs, for they take material forms to be aggregates. If paraphrased according to the Vaibhāṣika view, the passage reads: ‘For example, material form aggregates. Here, even when an object is broken into particles or should it be excluded by the mind from *dharmas* like taste, etc., the cognition “intrinsic nature of material form” still arises.’ In what follows, I discuss the second way in which the Vaibhāṣikas believe that things can qualify as fundamental entities.

¹⁷⁴ Here, I follow Szegedi in emending Pradhan’s ‘*rasārḥān*’ to ‘*rasādīn*’ (304).

¹⁷⁵ See Cox: ‘the term *svabhāva* in the distinctive sense of the intrinsic nature of a category or of an individual *dharma* is not used in the earliest Sarvāstivāda canonical Abhidharma texts; it appears only in texts from the period of the early *vibhāṣā* compendia onward, that is, concurrent with the systematic development of the analytical method of categorization by inclusion. It is then plausible to infer that this sense of *svabhāva* as intrinsic nature, so important in later Sarvastivada exegesis for the interpretation of the character of *dharmas per se*, first emerged through its function as the criterion determining categories of *dharmas*, specifically in the context of inclusion’ (“From Category to Ontology” 561).

using these *dharmas*. For example, when we say of a pot that it is characterised by materiality, by being pot-shaped, etc., we know that this is merely true on the level of convention. And any characteristics which we conventionally attribute to the pot must be explained by ultimately real *dharmas* that we have cognised as a ‘pot’. Thus, the materiality of the pot must be explained through these *dharmas*, the shape of the pot must be explained through the arrangement of these *dharmas*, and ‘intrinsic nature’ was posited to be whatever thing *dharmas* had that allowed them to serve as this explanatory grounds.

A material *dharma*’s intrinsic nature was posited to be whatever it is about that *dharma* that accounts for the materiality of a pot or a body; and a mental *dharma*’s intrinsic nature was posited to be whatever it is about that *dharma* that accounts for the mental nature of our thoughts, sensations, feelings, etc. Here, an explanatory distinction between ‘intrinsic nature’ and ‘other nature’ (*parabhāva*) emerged. A conceptual designation has ‘other nature’, meaning that any conventional facts about their nature are ultimately accounted for by something else—i.e. *dharmas*. And a fundamental entity has ‘intrinsic nature’: its nature (*bhāva*) is precisely its own (*sva*), and we do not need to look towards some other thing to account for this specific nature.

In the *nirvacana* definition of *dharma*,¹⁷⁶ we see intrinsic nature explained in terms of having an intrinsic characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*):

As for the linguistic analysis (*nirvacana*): because it bears an intrinsic characteristic, it is a *dharma*.

nirvacanaṃ tu svalakṣaṇa-dhāraṇād dharmah. (AKBh I.2)

¹⁷⁶ This *nirvacana* appears in Vasubandhu’s *AKBh* VI.4, but he seems to be citing this *nirvacana* from other *Ahidharma* texts. See Cox 2004: ‘A definition is found, however, in Upaśānta’s and Dharmatrāta’s commentaries on the *Abhidharmahṛdaya*, and is transmitted in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* and subsequent texts: that is “‘dharma means ‘upholding,’ [namely], upholding intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*).” Although lacking an overt abstract definition, the *Mahāvibhāṣā* uses similar terminology in several passages, implying a concept of *dharma* comparable to that suggested by these definitions’ (559).

Multiple characteristics were suggested for each type of *dharma* by various Abhidharma philosophers. For instance, with regard to material *dharmas*, some took their cue from suttas like the *Khajjanīya Sutta* and proposed that the intrinsic characteristic of material *dharmas* was to be deformed (*ruppati*) by conditions (*SN 22.79*). Others proposed that the intrinsic characteristic of material *dharmas* was resistance (*pratighāta*)¹⁷⁷—a material *dharma* ‘obstructs the arising of another in its place’ (*AKBh I.29bc: sva-deśe parasya utpatti pratibandha*).¹⁷⁸ Vasubandhu argues that it is this characteristic of resistance which (1) distinguishes a *dharma* as material and not mental, (2) makes aggregation possible by preventing other *dharmas* from existing in their place, causing *dharmas* to have to stand side by side instead of overlapping¹⁷⁹ and (3) explains the kinds of materiality that we associate with conceptual designations like pots—e.g. when an object is capable of blocking light from travelling through it, this is because there is a ‘wall’ of *dharmas* preventing anything from moving through their place.¹⁸⁰

3.3 The metaphysical status of aggregates and *indriyas*

Although there was universal agreement among the Ābhidharmikas regarding the status of *dharmas* as fundamental entities, disagreements arose regarding whether anything else should be allowed into this category of entities. Equating non-eliminability with indivisibility, Vasubandhu interpreted the eliminativist principle as an atomist principle and concluded that only these atomistic *dharmas* could be fundamental entities. The Vaibhāṣikas did not agree with this view, arguing that aggregates and *indriyas* should count as fundamental entities even though they have

¹⁷⁷ See *AKBh I.13*.

¹⁷⁸ For how resistance is discussed by Vasubandhu in *AKBh I.43d*, see Carpenter with Ngaserin.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. *Vimśatikā* 12.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. *Vimśatikā* 14.

parts. Here, the debate between Vasubandhu and the Vaibhāṣikas about the status of *indriyas* is crucial to understanding how and why they ended up with different accounts of the *indriyas* over gender. However, since the debate about the aggregates contains the clearest explanation for each of their stances on the metaphysical status of partite things, I will start with the case of aggregates and then proceed to the case of *indriyas*.

According to the Vaibhāṣikas, there are certain aggregates (*skandhas*) that cannot be explained away by *dharmas*, and these should count as fundamental entities as well.¹⁸¹ In the *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya*, Vasubandhu argues against this Vaibhāṣika view, claiming that all aggregated *dharmas* must be conceptual designations (*prajñapti*):

If ‘aggregate’ means ‘heap’, then aggregates become mere conceptual designations. This is because they have the quality of being a collection of individual fundamental entities, like a heap¹⁸² and a person.¹⁸³

yadi rāśy-arthāḥ skandhārthāḥ prajñapti-santaḥ skandhāḥ prāpnuvanti. aneka-dravya-samūhatvāt rāśi-pudgalavat. (AKBh I.20)

Here, Vasubandhu argues that aggregates should be understood as *rāśis* or ‘heaps’. Just as a heap is a collection of individual things, an aggregate is just a ‘collection of individual fundamental entities’. If we were to distinguish conceptually all the individual *dharmas* from this collection, no

¹⁸¹ As Cox describes this view in the *Mahāvibhāṣā*: ‘The typologies present three major types of existence: real existence (*dravya*), as in the case of the category of aggregates or individual *dharmas* that are established in intrinsic nature; provisional existence (*prajñapti*), as in the case of the composite objects of ordinary experience; and relative existence (*āpekṣika*), as in the case of the mutual dependence of long and short or contingencies of time and place.’ (“From Category to Ontology” 569)

¹⁸² Sangpo and Pruden follow la Vallée Poussin in translating heap (*rāśi*) as referring to a heap of grain. Pruden translates ‘a pile of wheat, or the *pudgala*’ (79); Sangpo translates ‘a heap of grain [*rāśi*], or the person (*pudgala*)’ (239). However, there is no evidence from the passage that this refers specifically to a heap of grain, and the analogy we find in the suttas about a heap of grain (*dhañña-rāśi*) has no relevance to the discussion here. In *AN* 8.8, for example, the analogy is of a great heap of grain (*mahā-dhañña-rāśi*) that people can scoop up in baskets and carry away with them. This, the sutta explains, is the kind of relationship that obtains between the Buddha’s teachings and the teachings disseminated by his disciples. Additionally, neither Paramārtha nor Xuánzàng took the text to be referring to a heap of grain. Paramārtha translates ‘for example, a gathering and a person’ (譬如聚及人); Xuánzàng translates ‘like a gathering; like the self’ (如聚如我).

¹⁸³ Vasubandhu’s specification that the person is merely a collection of individual fundamental entities is revisited later in *AKBh* IX, when he argues against the Pudgalavāda Buddhist view that the person is not identical to the aggregates but is something we are caused to conceive (*prajñapyate*) in relation with the aggregates (*skandhān upādāya*). Also see Carpenter.

cognition of the aggregate would remain—they are ‘mere conceptual designations’. Vasubandhu proceeds to characterise the Vaibhāṣika response as such:

No, because there is the quality of being an aggregate (*skandhatva*) for even a single fundamental particle (*dravya-paramāṇu*).

na. ekasya api dravya-paramāṇoḥ skandhatvāt. (AKBh I.20)

Here, the Vaibhāṣikas are portrayed as taking issue with Vasubandhu’s application of cognitive exclusion to the aggregate. If, starting with a cognition of an aggregate of *dharmas*, I proceed to cognitively distinguish all the individual *dharmas* from it, the one part of the cognition that remains is the very idea of aggregation. Thus, this aggregate has one quality that cannot be accounted for by its individual *dharmas*—namely, the quality of being an aggregate (*skandhatva*). As the Vaibhāṣika philosopher Saṅghabhadra proceeds to clarify their position:

This objection is not like that. Because the established meaning is ‘that which is the basis of a heap’, it does not mean ‘heap’.

此難不然，於聚所依 立義言故，非聚即義 (T1562, p343c25-26)

Vasubandhu defines aggregates as ‘heaps’, by which he means that they are actually individual *dharmas* that we choose to treat as a collection¹⁸⁴ for some practical reason or another. Take the example of material aggregates. A material *dharma* has resistance, allowing it to obstruct other material *dharmas* from standing in its place. This explains why material *dharmas* do not overlap but begin to exist side by side with each other. It is through existing side by side that they take up space, resulting in our ability to cognise a ‘heap’ of *dharmas*. Here, Vasubandhu thinks that existing side by side is all that is occurring on the level of ultimate reality, and what we call ‘heaps’

¹⁸⁴ These issues continue to be debated after the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*. Notably, they arise in Dignāga’s *Ālambanaparīkṣā* when he considers the distinction between a mere collection and an aggregation. See Duckworth, et. al.’s translation and commentary, *Dignāga’s Investigation of the Percept*.

or ‘aggregates’ of *dharmas* is simply a provisional label that we give to some of these adjacent material *dharmas* based on our current desires and interests.

Take the example of a coconut. I might begin by labelling some adjacent material *dharmas* as a ‘coconut tree’. But when some of the adjacent *dharmas* of this ‘coconut tree’ accumulate enough to drop apart from the rest of the *dharmas*, I might call those dropped *dharmas* a ‘coconut’, treating them as a different selection of *dharmas* from the initial ‘coconut tree’. And when I intend to drink from this ‘coconut’, I start distinguishing between a ‘coconut husk’—i.e., the *dharmas* I wish to break apart—and ‘coconut water’—i.e., the *dharmas* I wish to drink.

In this example, there are no ultimate grounds for deciding whether ‘coconut husk’ and ‘coconut water’ is a more accurate designation than ‘coconut’. Rather, whether we choose to indulge in a particular grouping depends entirely on our desires at that point in time. If I did not care to drink from the coconut, I would not be so invested in distinguishing the husk from the shell. If I held no interest in the *dharmas* that fell apart from the ‘coconut tree’, I would simply cognise that ‘some of the coconut tree has broken off’. The reason why I chose to group those *dharmas* together and identify them as ‘coconut’ instead of grouping them with all the vegetative debris on the ground is because of my own specific interest in those *dharmas*. Since these groupings and designations shift and change based on our current interests and desires, Vasubandhu concludes that there is no fundamental or ultimately real basis for aggregates.

Saṅghabhadra agrees with Vasubandhu that coconuts and clay pots and such are mere ‘heaps’ that we have conceptually designated and grouped together based on our own interests. But he explains that none of these are what the Vaibhāṣikas mean by aggregates. According to Saṅghabhadra, aggregates are not ‘heaps’, but refer specifically to ‘that which is the basis of a heap’ (聚所依). Here, Vaibhāṣikas use the term ‘basis’ (所依; *āśraya*) to refer to a fundamentally

real entity capable of causing the thought (心; *citta*) of ‘heap’ (聚; *skandha*) to arise within us. Take the example of a material aggregate (色聚; *rūpa-skandha*). Vaibhāṣikas believe that each material aggregate is made of ‘ten material bases and a material form’ (十色處及法處)¹⁸⁵ that necessarily and naturally aggregate together. They argue that these have to be fundamentally real, for it is only by virtue of their natural aggregating that it is even possible for us to perceive them at all. Thus, the term ‘aggregate’ does not refer to any and all ‘heaps’ (e.g., pots, houses, persons), but refers specifically to those specific combinations of *dharmas* that naturally aggregate together. With these aggregates, it is not our desires and whims that motivate us to conceptually designate these *dharmas* as an aggregate; rather, it is the natural aggregating of these specific *dharmas* that causes us to accurately grasp them as an aggregate.

On his opponents’ behalf, Vasubandhu suggests the example of particles, which Ābhidharmikas posit to be aggregates of *dharmas* which arise together (*sahotpāda*).¹⁸⁶ While the phenomenon of material *dharmas* existing side by side can be explained by appealing to each individual *dharma*’s intrinsic characteristic of resistance, this might not be enough to explain the kind of particles that the Ābhidharmikas endorse. For with respect to natural co-arising, it is insufficient to know *that* material *dharmas* can exist side by side; we want to know *why* these specific *dharmas* consistently arise side-by-side with each other. And this, the Vaibhāṣikas argue, is the one characteristic of an aggregate which cannot be accounted for by appealing to the resistance performed by each of its individual parts.

¹⁸⁵ T1545 p383b14.

¹⁸⁶ See *AKBh* II.22, where Vasubandhu discusses the Vaibhāṣika view that particles—i.e., ‘aggregated atoms’ (*saṃghātāṇu*)—are needed to ground our experience of reality. These particles are multifaceted and have parts. They are co-arising (*sahotpāda*) combinations of eight to eleven *dharmas*, depending on whether *indriyas* or sound (*śabdāyatana*) are involved, but they are still considered to be atomic in the etymological sense of being physically indivisible.

Thus, the Vaibhāṣika position is that divisibility does not always imply eliminability. Ābhidharmika particles are not physically divisible,¹⁸⁷ but they are certainly conceptually divisible—since a particle is a partite entity composed of *dharmas*, we are capable of mentally dividing it into these individual parts. But recall Vasubandhu’s wording of the criterion for fundamental entities:

Even when broken or when excluded from other *dharmas* by the mind, the cognition of that still arises. (*AKBh* VI.4)

The first strategy for resisting eliminativism was to posit partless *dharmas* that could not be physically or conceptually divided. But the ‘even when’ wording also allows for a second strategy of positing a partite entity whose cognition does not disappear even after the entity is physically or conceptually divided. When we move from cognising a pot to cognising the material *dharmas* that the pot breaks down into, the second cognition perfectly replaces and eliminates the initial pot-cognition. But the Vaibhāṣikas argue that when we cognise an aggregate, not only do we grasp all the characteristics that are accounted for by its constituent *dharmas*, we also grasp from their consistent co-arising that some necessary relationship exists between them. When we use the cognitive process of exclusion to take this cognition apart, eliminating each *dharma*’s intrinsic characteristic from this cognition, the final characteristic that continues to arise is that specific relational quality which we can only articulate in reference to the whole and not the individual parts. After all, all *dharmas* are partless, which means that it is impossible for a material *dharma* to have both its own intrinsic characteristic *and* the characteristic of being inclined to group with its specific counterpart. Since this final characteristic cannot be outsourced to some other nature (*parabhāva*) that belongs to one of its *dharmas*, the only option left for the aggregate is for this

¹⁸⁷ See Pruden n. 220.

nature to truly belong to itself (*svabhāva*). Therefore, the Vaibhāṣika's version of an aggregate can certainly be *divided* into *dharma*s, but it cannot be *explained away* or *eliminated* by *dharma*s; and that is all that the Vaibhāṣikas require to count them as fundamental entities.

Vasubandhu is not convinced by this view. He maintains that there is no such thing as natural aggregation, so no special relational quality exists that would prevent aggregates from being fully eliminated. This pattern of disagreement continues into the next debate, where the Vaibhāṣikas apply that second strategy again to argue for the fundamental reality of the ten sensory bases (*āyatana*). Here, what I translate as a 'sensory basis' should be understood as a basis for sense-related thoughts (*citta*) and thought-concomitants (*caitta*).¹⁸⁸ These ten sensory bases are meant to completely account for the arising of all our sense-related thoughts, and are divided into two main categories. First and most relevant to the present discussion, there are the five sensory *indriyas*: (1) *indriya* over sight, (2) *indriya* over hearing, (3) *indriya* over smell, (4) *indriya* over taste, (5) *indriya* over touch. Second, there are the five types of objects which enable there to be an object field (*viśaya*) for each *indriya*: (6) forms (*rūpa*), (7) sounds (*śabda*), (8) smells (*gandha*), (9) tastes (*rasa*), (10) tangibles (*spraṣṭavya*).¹⁸⁹

As we will see in the following passage, Vasubandhu and the Vaibhāṣikas agree that these five *indriyas* and their five corresponding objects are made up of atoms. Here, note their consensus about advancing a materialist account of the sense-related *indriyas*, which I will return to later. For the Vaibhāṣikas, partite entities like *indriyas* and the objects of *indriyas* count as fundamental entities. In contrast, Vasubandhu thinks that what we call '*indriyas*' and 'objects' are merely

¹⁸⁸ In *AKBh* I.20, Vasubandhu describes a sensory basis (*āyatana*) as a gateway (*dvāra*) for the arrival (*āya*) of thought (*citta*) and thought-concomitants (*caitta*). Where the metaphorical 'doors' of the sensory bases are open, thoughts and thought-concomitants arrive before our minds.

¹⁸⁹ See *AKBh* I.23 for a more detailed explanation of this list, and I.24 for Vasubandhu's explanation of what *rūpa* or material form specifically refers to in this instance.

conceptual designations for a selection of atoms. The Vaibhāṣikas continue to appeal to the idea that these ‘heaps’ of *dharmas* and ‘collections’ of atoms can and must be fundamental entities:

Because being the gateway of arising belongs to collections of atoms like [*indriya* over] sight, etc.

bahūnāṃ cakṣur-ādi-paramāṇūnām āya-dvāra-bhāvāt. (AKBh I.20)

According to the Vaibhāṣikas, it is only as a collection of atoms that each sensory basis is able to be a gateway for the arising of sense-related thoughts within their domain. Here, the idea is once again that individual atoms are incapable of acting as the gateway for the arising of sense-related thoughts, and it is the collective that must be responsible for acting as this gateway. For instance, an individual atom does not have the ability to allow me to see some object, but a collection of atoms arranged pupil-wise into visual receptors does.¹⁹⁰ And if the Vaibhāṣikas are right that the arising of thought cannot be explained by individual atoms, then the collections of atoms would need to be fundamentally real to account for it.

Here, we see the Vaibhāṣikas developing their own metaphysical take on the *indriyas* initially discussed in the suttas. The suttas tended towards explaining that which was *indriya* over an outcome as a long list of individual behaviours, mental generations, etc. Thus, they were never explicitly committed to the metaphysical notion of ‘an *indriya*’ as some kind of singular entity. But the Vaibhāṣikas take each of the five *indriyas* over sense-related thought to be partite material fundamental entities. Thus, where the suttas leaned into the adjectival meaning of *indriya* (e.g., ‘things which are *indriya* over sight’), it becomes appropriate with the Vaibhāṣikas to also treat *indriya* as a noun (e.g., ‘an *indriya* over sight’).

¹⁹⁰ I will discuss the passages which identify the sensory *indriyas* as biological sensory receptors later in the chapter.

Vasubandhu rejects this account, claiming that there is no reason to believe that individual atoms cannot be gateways for the arising of sense-related thoughts. He reframes this characteristic of being a ‘gateway’ in causal terms, explaining how it is possible for each and every atom to play its own part in being either a non-obstructing cause or a concurrent cause for the arising of sense-related thought:

That is not the case, because being the non-obstructing cause (*kāraṇa*) or being the concurrent cause (*sahakāritva*) of the object field belongs to each and every individual atom of the whole. It could not belong to an *indriya* or the other sensory base [i.e., the object of an *indriya*].

na. ekaśaḥ samagrāṇāṃ kāraṇa-bhāvāt viśaya-sahakāritvād vā na indriyaṃ pṛthag āyatanaṃ syāt. (AKBh I.20)

The atoms which are collectively labelled as *indriya* over sight, etc., are each a ‘non-obstructing cause’ (*kāraṇa*) for the arising of sensory information; the atoms that are collectively labelled as objects of the *indriyas* are ‘concurrent causes’ for the object field. Here, I will focus on his explanation of what it means for the atoms of the *indriyas* to be *kāraṇas*. *Kāraṇa* is commonly translated as ‘efficient cause’, but based on Vasubandhu’s description of *kāraṇa*, I translate this as ‘non-obstructing cause’. As Vasubandhu explains in *AKBh* II.62cd, the claim that all *dharmas* are *kāraṇa*-causes for the arising of conditioned *dharmas* means that these *dharmas* are all residing (*avasthāna*) in state of non-obstruction (*aviḥna-bhāva*).

Take the earlier example of resistance in material *dharmas*. According to Vasubandhu, there is no special causal power that is held by specific material *dharmas*, enabling them to efficiently or actively cause another specific material *dharma* to arise—this, as noted earlier, would require a material *dharma* to have two characteristics, disqualifying them as a fundamental entity. Rather, the only characteristic that Vasubandhu thinks a material *dharma* has is its ability to exist

in its specific place, which obstructs anything else from arising there.¹⁹¹ Thus, it is only by virtue of not being anywhere but where it currently is that it does nothing to prevent the arising of material *dharma*s in other places. To say that this means that this material *dharma* efficiently caused the arising of another material *dharma* would be, as Kamtekar notes, to impose a reading of causation that is far more active than is warranted by the text.¹⁹²

Vasubandhu’s account of *kāraṇa* offers a metaphysical analysis of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*)—the fact that all arising things are conditioned by everything else, making us incapable of controlling what happens to the things we wish to take as self or as belonging to self. Why did this *dharma* not arise here and now? Because one or more currently existing *dharma* or *dharma*s had characteristics that impeded it from arising there and then. Why did this other *dharma* (e.g., sensation) arise here and now? Vasubandhu’s novel take on what it means for the atoms of these *indriyas* to each be ‘gateways’ (*dvāras*) that allow sensory information to ‘arrive’ (*āya*) before our mind is that the individual atoms of the five *indriyas* did not obstruct this sensation from arising. There is no power of efficient causation that is held by each of these atoms, nor is there some special power or ability of being a gateway (*dvāra*) that they are only able to hold

¹⁹¹ Thus, Vasubandhu’s view that resistance in place is the only characteristic that any and all atoms can have is the inevitable outcome of equating non-eliminability to indivisibility. We see that this is clearly unacceptable to the Vaibhāṣikas, whose aggregated atoms or particles are multifaceted in order to account for the variations in our perceptual experiences. For example, the Vaibhāṣikas allow for material form to be twofold (*ubhayathā*), having both colour and shape, explaining why we perceive specific colours – e.g. blue, yellow, light, dark – and shapes – e.g. long, short. Vasubandhu criticises this option by insisting once again that a single (*eka*) fundamental entity (*dravya*) cannot be twofold, but does not do much in the way of providing his own explanation for why we perceive (or seem to perceive) variations in colour. But in his later Mahāyāna work, the *Vimśatikā*, Vasubandhu takes up colour and shape yet again. At *Vimśatikā* 14, he brings up his old view that colours and shapes are material objects of sight, explaining that the only options that were available to him as an Ābhidharmika were these being singular atoms or pluralities of atoms. Vasubandhu proceeds to argue that both these options are impossible, and that the only good option is to accept that our thoughts of colour and shape are not caused by atoms at all; but are simply thoughts. Thus, Vasubandhu ultimately gives up on using atoms to explain the variations in our perceptual experiences, resorting instead to an idealist metaphysical account of reality where colour, shape, etc. are mental in nature.

¹⁹² See Kamtekar: ‘I leave *kāraṇa-hetu* untranslated as I find his “efficient cause” to be more active than is indicated by the criterion ‘not being an obstacle to the arising of a *dharma* capable of arising’, and to include items like the master who doesn’t oppress the villagers, Nirvana, and beings in Hell’ (n. 33).

collectively. Thus, Vasubandhu concludes that there is no need for *indriyas* to be fundamental entities—only the atoms are fundamentally real.

Where the *indriyas* over gender are concerned, these differences in how Vasubandhu and the Vaibhāṣikas characterise the power of *indriyas* end up having far-reaching implications for each of their views on gender. But it is also surprisingly important to their subsequent discussion about the *indriyas* over gender to take note of the places where they do in fact agree about how these sensory *indriyas* are characterised. Specifically, they are in agreement that these five sensory *indriyas* are—either conceptually (Vasubandhu) or fundamentally (Vaibhāṣika)—made of atoms, and that these specific atoms are arranged into material sensory receptors that—either conceptually (Vasubandhu) or fundamentally (Vaibhāṣika)—are gateways for the arrival of sensory information. This information would not be particularly important for the *Sutta Piṭaka* account of the *indriyas* over gender, since the suttas never related them to or compared them with the sensory *indriyas*. But by the time of Vasubandhu and his Vaibhāṣika rivals such as Saṅghabhadra, the dominant view was that the *indriyas* over gender were made of atoms as well. Specifically, they were taken to be a conceptual designation for a fraction of the atoms that belong to the fifth sensory *indriya*—*indriya* over touch. Thus, both Vasubandhu and the Vaibhāṣikas advanced a materialist account of these two gender-related *indriyas*, subsuming them both under the sensory *indriya* over touch.

This is a dramatic departure from *Sutta Piṭaka*'s psychological account of gender as arising from the irrational labelling of things as belonging to either 'woman' or 'man'. In the next section, I account for this transformation by detailing the evolution of the initial list of twenty-two *indriyas* across the many centuries between the Pāli Canon (c. 5th century BCE) and the time of Vasubandhu and Saṅghabhadra (4th-5th century CE). To chart this evolution, I translate portions

from the Abhidharma Sarvāstivādin *Mahā-vibhāṣā* ('*Great Compendium*'), which is dated around 150 CE and records a range of positions on how this list should be understood according to their shared metaphysical framework. It is here that we see not only a wide range of Abhidharma Sarvāstivādin proposals on what kind of entities the *indriyas* were, but a move by the Vaibhāṣika-aligned authors of the text to establish their own positions as the only correct Abhidharma Sarvāstivāda view.

3.4 Vaibhāṣikas and the materiality of gender

When the Theravādin authors of the *Indriya-vibhaṅga* compiled an initial list of twenty-two *indriyas*, they did not claim that this list of *indriyas* had any significance over and above providing information about the sutta's uses of the term.¹⁹³ They did not claim that the exhausted the legitimate uses of the term, nor did they think it was necessary to justify the ordering of the items of this list. And while they did offer some options for classifying these *indriyas* soteriologically, they did not apply these soteriological classification schemes to every *indriya* on the list and were comfortable with leaving some *indriyas* 'undeclared' (*abyākata*).¹⁹⁴

But as the Ābhidharmikas started establishing their own metaphysical framework, there was a push to reinterpret and reorganise these initial lists in accordance with this framework. They generally agreed that all of the twenty-two *indriyas* on the list were at least conceptual designations

¹⁹³ Still, as Cox notes, what early scholars took to be important enough to form lists about and what they chose to exclude reflects their own input on what the 'essence' of the teachings was: 'Though this method of enumerative summary obviously serves the practical purpose of aiding memorization, the sūtras themselves clearly utilize the list form to establish the essence of the Buddha's teaching and to preclude other opinions' (*Disputed Dharmas* 9).

¹⁹⁴ Here, their approach was to indicate whether a particular *indriya* was mentioned to be skilful (*kusala*), helpful (*sarāṇa*), unskilful (*akusala*), harmful (*araṇa*), fettering (*saṃyojana*), afflicting (*āśava*), etc., within the suttas. And where the suttas did not provide this kind of information about a particular *indriya*, they acknowledged this by labelling it as *abyākata* ('undeclared').

(*prajñapti*),¹⁹⁵ but decisions had to be made about how many and which of the twenty-two *indriyas* were fundamental entities (*dravya*). They also agreed that *indriyas* consisted of *dharmas*, but decisions had to be made about what kind of *dharmas*—material or mental¹⁹⁶—they were each made of. Finally, they agreed that *indriyas* were powerful in some sense, but decisions had to be made about what power(s) each *indriya* held and how they exercised such power(s).

By the time that the young Vasubandhu was ordained, many of these decisions had already been made and an orthodox position had long been established. The Kaśmīra-based Vaibhāṣikas were the most influential Abhidharma position and had become nearly synonymous with Sarvāstivāda, Kaśmīra was the central powerhouse of Buddhist intellectual activity, and Vaibhāṣika orthodoxy had spread far beyond Kaśmīra to Gandhāra and other regions.¹⁹⁷ Thus, it was no surprise that Vasubandhu travelled to Kaśmīra after his ordination to study under the Vaibhāṣika master, Skandhila.¹⁹⁸ And even as we see Vasubandhu resisting and revising the Vaibhāṣika view of the *indriyas* in his *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya*, his understanding of the *indriyas* was very much based on the orthodox framing of the list.

But during the earlier stages of Abhidharma discourse, these were very much open questions, and different Abhidharma philosophers proposed vastly different answers to each of these questions. We see some of these proposals recorded in the Abhidharma Sarvāstivādin *Mahāvibhāṣā* (*‘Great Compendium’*), dated around 150 CE.¹⁹⁹ In this text, the authors of the *Mahāvibhāṣā*

¹⁹⁵ In other words, none of them should be removed from the list for not being *indriya* in at least a conventional sense. Though some Abhidharma scholars were clearly not on board with the way that some of these *indriyas* were described, their strategy was usually to change or greatly limit the explanation of what they were powerful over.

¹⁹⁶ And as I explain in n. 203, a third controversial category that is neither mental nor material.

¹⁹⁷ Willems et al. 124.

¹⁹⁸ All biographical information about Vasubandhu comes from Pereira and Tiso.

¹⁹⁹ See Potter: ‘The *Mahāvibhāṣā* is a massive sourcebook of Sarvāstivādin doctrine, compiled according to tradition in the first half of the second century A.D. at the time of the third sectarian council convened in Kashmir under the sponsorship of King Kaniṣka... Taiken Kimura, however, first demonstrated that such references in the *Mahāvibhāṣā* as “In the past, at the time of Kaniṣka”, show that the text had to have been composed later than Kaniṣka’s time. He suggests that the text probably dates from sometime between the reign of Kaniṣka and the advent of Nāgārjuna, or ca. 150 A.D.’ (112)

*vibhāṣā*²⁰⁰ report three different Sarvāstivādin positions on this matter. Each reported view begins with a count of the number of *indriyas* that were named (名) by each position, which we will see was agreed to be twenty-two by all of them.²⁰¹ Here, ‘名’ is often used to signal a conceptual designation (*prajñapti*), suggesting that all the ‘named’ *indriyas* are at least conceptual designations. Then, we are provided with the number of *indriyas* that were considered to be distinct fundamental entities (實體) by that position and a specification of (and an occasional explanation for) the *indriyas* that were rejected as fundamental entities by that position. One of the recorded positions is from the philosopher Dharmatrāta:

The master Dharmatrāta makes this kind of explanation: twenty two are named; fourteen are fundamental entities. For the *indriyas* over the first five, life, equanimity, and concentration are not distinct fundamental entities.

尊者法救作如是說。名二十二。實體十四。謂即前五及命捨定無別實體故。問何故彼說命根無實體。答命根是不相應行蘊所攝。(T.1545 p730b14-13)

Here, it is interesting to see which *indriyas* Dharmatrāta considers to be fundamental entities and which he does not. For example, among the six *indriyas* that are described as bases (*āyatana*s) for the arising of thought, Dharmatrāta rejects that the ‘first five’ (前五)—i.e., *indriyas* over sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch—are fundamental entities. Unfortunately, the *Mahā-vibhāṣā* does not

²⁰⁰ For the various theories on who the authors of this compendium were, see Potter 111-112.

²⁰¹ T1545 p728c20: ‘The masters, in reference to what the Buddha says: “Of the twenty two *indriyas*, we cannot reduce them and say there are twenty one, we cannot increase them and say there are twenty three. Because it was said by the Buddha that there can be no increase or decrease, we must not increase or decrease them. As we must not increase or decrease them, we must not make them more or less, we must not lose or gain any”.’ 尊者於佛所說二十二根不能少減說二十一。不能少增說二十三。以佛所說無增減故不可增減。如不可增減。不可多少。不可損益。The text records several non-Buddhist positions, such as the Sāṃkhya position that there are only eleven *indriyas* (‘又數論者說十一根’; T1545 p279c27-28). There is apparently also a non-Buddhist (外道) position that there are 120 *indriyas* (‘或復有說。百二十根。’), but no proponent is specified for this view (T1545 p730a1-5).

report his reasoning for this,²⁰² but it is certainly different from both the Vaibhāṣika position of taking all six of them to be fundamental entities and from Vasubandhu’s position of rejecting all of them as fundamental entities. It is also worth noting that even though the first five bases (*āyatana*s) failed to make the cut, *indriyas* over gender were accepted by Dharmatrāta as fundamental entities.

The *Mahā-vibhāṣā* also reports the Sarvāstivādin Buddhadeva’s minimalist account²⁰³ which reduces all twenty-two *indriyas* to one fundamental *indriya*—namely, *indriya* over mind:

The master Buddhadeva makes this kind of explanation: twenty-two are named; only one is a fundamental entity. Namely, *indriya* over mind. It is explained like this: all conditioned *dharmas* have [one of] two intrinsic natures. The first is material elements (*mahā-bhūta*; 大種); the second is thought (*citta*; 心). Without material elements there are no derived material forms; without thoughts there are no thought concomitants. All forms are all distinguished by material elements; the formless is distinguished by thought. Following this meaning, there is only one fundamental *indriya*.

尊者覺天作如是說。名二十二。實體唯一。所謂意根。彼作是說。諸有為法有二自性。一大種。二心。離大種無所造色。離心無心所。諸色皆是大種差別。無色皆是心之差別。由此義故實根唯一。(T.1545 p730b25-c1)

²⁰² The passage proceeds to explain why Dharmatrāta rejected the *indriyas* over life, equanimity, and concentration, but it does not explain his rationale for rejecting the five bases as fundamental entities. But earlier in the *Vibhāṣā*, he is reported to hold the view that what is actually responsible for the seeing (見) of form (色) is not *indriya* over sight but consciousness related to the eye (眼識). (T1545 p61c9) Later in the chapter, I demonstrate that Vasubandhu adopts the same view, replicating some of Dharmatrāta’s argumentative strategies against the Vaibhāṣikas. Elsewhere in the *Vibhāṣā*, Dharmatrāta is also reported as rejecting the Vaibhāṣika view that the material aggregate (*rūpa-skandha*) is made of ‘ten material bases and material form’ (T1545 p383b14: 十色處及法處). he claims instead that ‘All material forms are sense bases or cognitive objects of the five sensory consciousnesses (*pañca-vijñāna-kāya*). For how could there be material form which is not a basis or cognitive object of the five sensory consciousnesses?’ (T1545 p383b17-18: 諸所有色皆五識身所依所緣。如何是色非五識身所依所緣。)

²⁰³ See Dhammajoti 2012: ‘Buddhadeva is unique in maintaining that derived matter (*bhautika*) is merely a state (*avasthā*) of the fundamental material elements (*mahābhūta*) (i, F 64), that the thought-concomitants (*caitta*: sensation, ideation, intention) are merely states of thought (*citta, vijñāna*)’ (124).

According to Buddhadeva, there are only two types of intrinsic natures—material elements and thought. So whatever the variances we seem to identify on a conventional level, on a fundamental level there can only really be two kinds of entities—material elements and thought. This means that when we identify twenty-two kinds of *indriyas* on the level of convention, it is theoretically only possible for there to be two kinds of entities there. Buddhadeva claims that there is only one fundamental *indriya* over mind, suggesting that he rejects that any material elements, derived material forms, forms, etc., are found amongst the twenty-two *indriyas*. Indeed, if one were to take the *indriyas* in the suttas to be lists of mental habits or psychological activities, then there is certainly a sutta-based rationale for Buddhadeva’s account. Since all twenty-two *indriyas* in Buddhadeva’s picture are mental in nature, Buddhadeva proposes the view that only one *indriya* over mind is needed to ultimately account for any and all of the thoughts and thought concomitants described within these lists. Thus, Buddhadeva concludes that all of the twenty-two *indriyas* actually reduce to a single fundamental mental *indriya* that is powerful over all sorts of thoughts and thought concomitants, encompassing all perceptions, sensations, irrational mental generations about gender, etc.

Note, however, that the *Mahā-vibhāṣā* was not a neutral compilation of Sarvāstivādin views. In addition to listing the different positions of their rivals, the Sarvāstivādin authors of the *Mahā-vibhāṣā* also indicated positions that were ‘answered correctly’ (答對).²⁰⁴ These opinions were labelled as belonging to Ābhidharmikas (對法者), whereas the views by Abhidharma Sarvāstivādin masters like Buddhadeva and Dharmatrāta were pejoratively labelled²⁰⁵ by the

²⁰⁴ Cf. Cox: ‘The Vibhāṣā compendia adopt a complex polemical style: each section of the *Jñānaprasthāna* is explained or justified as an attempt to present “correct principle” or as an implicit response to the faulty theories of other schools, which are listed in turn, but usually not refuted’ (*Disputed Dharmas* 34).

²⁰⁵ See Willemen et al.: ‘Further analyzing the use of these terms, it seems that ‘Dārṣāntika’ is a pejorative term, used in contempt by an opponent, while the term ‘Sautrāntika’ holds a positive connotation. This fact explains perfectly well why in the *Mahāvibhāṣā*—the work that gave its name to Vaibhāṣika *Abhidharma*—we especially find the term Dārṣāntika (86), i.e., the

authors as Dārṣṭāntika views. This demonstrates a deliberate move on the part of the authors to reject Buddhadeva and Dharmatrāta's status as Abhidharma Sarvāstivādins—they are not Ābhidharmikas but Dārṣṭāntikas, so their positions are not Abhidharma positions and should not be adopted by Ābhidharmikas.

With that in mind, the following is the view that the authors of the *Mahā-vibhāṣā* claimed was 'answered correctly'. Sometime after the *Mahā-vibhāṣā*, this view became known within the tradition as the Vaibhāṣika view—namely, the view held by the 'followers of the *Vibhāṣā*'. And nearly three centuries later when Vasubandhu and Saṅghabhadra were studying in Kāsmīra, this view had long been established as the orthodox Abhidharma view:

Dharma-practitioners who answer correctly say: twenty-two are named; seventeen are fundamental entities. For amongst them, *indriyas* over man, woman, and the three pure *indriyas* are not distinct fundamental entities. What is the reason that *indriyas* over man and woman are not distinct fundamental entities? The answer is that both of them are actually included under *indriya* over touch. As it is said: "How do we understand *indriya* over woman? It means 'part of *indriya* over touch.' How do we understand *indriya* over man? It means 'part of *indriya* over touch'."

答對法者言。名二十二。實體十七。於中男女三無漏根無別體故。問何故男女根無別體耶。答此二即是身根攝故。如說女根云何。謂身根少分。男根云何。謂身根少分。(T.1545 p730a29-b4)

Here, we see the orthodox position that Vasubandhu and Saṅghabhadra were taught, which proposes seventeen *indriyas* as fundamental entities. With regards to the gender *indriyas*, the

Kāsmīri referring to those who—incorrectly—rely on the authority of the *sūtras*, while in the *Abhidharmakośa* – Vasubandhu is generally accepted to give Sautrāntika interpretations of Sarvāstivāda tenets—we find the term Sautrāntika, i.e., referring to the group's own views. This implies that we do not have to see Dārṣṭāntika and Sautrāntika as two chronologically subsequent schools, but as terms denoting a different appreciation. Since Saṅghabhadra in his *Nyāyānusāra* again holds to the Vaibhāṣika opinion, the re-occurrence of a majority of 'Dārṣṭāntika' is logical' (109).

Vaibhāṣikas make the novel and unprecedented move within Sarvāstivāda of subsuming the *indriyas* over gender under *indriya* over touch. This idea of associating the *indriyas* over gender with *indriya* over touch was certainly not found in Dharmatrāta’s view, since he rejected that *indriya* over touch was a fundamental entity for other reasons and took the *indriyas* over gender to be distinct fundamental entities. And Buddhadeva thought that the *indriyas* over gender should be subsumed under *indriya* over mind, not *indriya* over touch. This means that the Vaibhāṣikas were the only group of Sarvāstivādins to propose subsuming the *indriyas* over gender under *indriya* over touch, and it also means that they were only group of Sarvāstivādins to treat the *indriyas* over gender as a part of one of the five bases (*āyatanas*).

From the *Mahā-vibhāṣā*, we also see that the Vaibhāṣika-aligned authors of this view took this as a reason to endorse a reorganisation of the list of *indriyas*. The authors of the *Mahā-vibhāṣā* moved the *indriyas* over gender to appear right after *indriya* over touch, and also moved *indriya* over mind from sixth on the list to ninth on the list (indicated below with strikethrough text).²⁰⁶ This reflects these authors’ rejection of the sutta’s grouping of six *indriyas* (e.g., *SN* 48.25)—*indriyas* over the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind—in favour of the sutta’s grouping of five *indriyas* (e.g., *MN* 43), which excludes *indriya* over mind. Moreover, the new ordering of *indriya* over mind as ninth on the list puts it next to the other thought-related *indriyas*—pleasure, pain, satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and indifference. Here, their reorganisation of the list of *indriyas* so that all the material *indriyas* could be side by side and all the mental *indriyas* could be side by side reflects their own stances on the materiality or mentality of each *indriya*:

Twenty-two *indriyas*—[*Material:*] *indriya* over sight, *indriya* over hearing, *indriya* over smell, *indriya* over taste, *indriya* over touch, *indriya* over mind, *indriya* over woman,

²⁰⁶ Vasubandhu documents this position in the *AKBh* I.48cd, recounting the view as it is explained in Vasumitra’s *Prakaraṇapāda*. Also see Cox for her explanation of this particular ordering of the list of *indriyas* (“From Category to Ontology” 552).

indriya over man, [**Dissociated From Thought:**]²⁰⁷ *indriya* over life, [**Mental:**] *indriya* over mind, *indriya* over pleasure, *indriya* over pain, *indriya* over satisfaction, *indriya* over dissatisfaction, *indriya* over indifference, *indriya* over faith, *indriya* over effort, *indriya* over mindfulness, *indriya* over concentration, *indriya* over wisdom, [**Pure:**] *indriya* over “I shall know what is unknown”, *indriya* over knowing, *indriya* over one-who-has-known-completely.

二十二根。眼根耳根鼻根舌根身根女根男根命根意根樂根苦根喜根憂根捨根信根精進根念根定根慧根未知當知根已知根具知根。(T1545 p728c10-13)

Thus, three centuries later, we see Vasubandhu taking it to be obvious not only that the first five *indriyas* are ‘collections of atoms’ (AKBh I.20: *bahūnām... paramāñūnām*), but also that the *indriyas* over gender are conceptual designations for a specific selection of the atoms belonging to *indriya* over touch. The atoms of the sensory *indriyas* are specified at AKBh I.9cd to be *rūpa-prasādas*, which literally translates as ‘clear material forms’ and refers to a highly-sensitive type of material form. And at AKBh I.44ab, it is further established through the descriptions of their precise locations that these atoms make up the biological sensory receptors. For example, the atoms of *indriya* over taste are arranged on the upper surface of the tongue in a half-moon shape, exactly where our taste buds are found; the atoms of *indriya* over sight are arranged to form the pupil of the eye, which was theorised by Ābhīdharmikas to be the location of the visual receptors; the leaf-like arrangement of atoms in the inner ear seems to point to sound receptors at the eardrum; and the atoms of *indriya* over touch are arranged in the silhouette of a body (‘like a body’,

²⁰⁷ Conditions dissociated from thought (*Citta-viprayukta-saṃskāra*; 不相應行) is a controversial category that is neither mental nor material. It is for this reason that Dharmatrāta rejects that *indriya* over life is a fundamental entity: ‘What is the reason that it is said that *indriya* over life is not a distinct fundamental entity? Answer: *indriya* over life is subsumed under conditions dissociated from thought. It is said that this is because conditions dissociated from thought are not fundamental entities’ (T1545 p730b15-16: 問何故彼說命根無實體。答命根是不相應行蘊所攝。彼說不相應行蘊無實體故。). Also see Cox, *Disputed Dharmas* 67-78.

kāya-vat) such that they are distributed all over the skin surface, which is where the touch-receptors are found.²⁰⁸ Since the *indriyas* over gender were subsumed under *indriya* over touch, they were taken to refer to a specific subsection of the atoms distributed over the skin surface:

The atoms of *indriya* over touch are arranged like a body. The atoms of *indriya* over woman are arranged like the shell of a drum. The atoms of *indriya* over man are arranged like a thumb.²⁰⁹

kāyēndriyā-paramāṇavaḥ kāya-vad avasthitāḥ. strīndriya-paramāṇavo bherī-kaṭāha-vat. puruṣēndriya-paramāṇavo 'ṅguṣṭha-vat. (AKBh I.43cd)

What is *indriya* or most powerful over man are the touch-receptors on the surface of the penis—i.e., atoms that are ‘arranged like a thumb’. And what is *indriya* or most powerful over woman was theorised to be the touch-receptors lining the walls of the vagina—i.e., material *dharmas* that are ‘arranged like the shell of a drum’. And though there are differences between the Vaibhāṣika interpretation and Vasubandhu’s interpretation of the above—the Vaibhāṣikas would emphasise that *indriya* over body is a fundamentally real *collection* of atoms, whereas Vasubandhu would

²⁰⁸ A few of these locations (visual receptors at the pupil; sound receptors at the ear-drum) do not line up with the current scientific understanding of the receptors, which is only to be expected.

²⁰⁹ Cabézon translates *paramāṇu* as ‘particles’: ‘The particles of the body faculty are [shaped] like the body. The particles of the female faculty are like the hollow of a kettledrum. The particles of the male faculty are like thumbs’ (415). From here, Cabézon concludes that Vasubandhu believes there are ‘tiny vaginal- and phallic-shaped particles’, which he calls the ‘female particles’ and ‘male particles’. This makes it such that men and women literally have ‘different types of particles’ (416) within them, and Cabézon is left puzzled about how these differently-shaped particles could be part of *indriya* over touch (i.e., the bodily faculty): ‘How the male and female faculties can have a different shape from the body faculty and yet be a part of it (*bhāga*) is not explained in the Kośa’ (415). The resolution to this is that Vasubandhu does not hold the view that ‘*paramāṇu*’ are shaped particles. Since *dharmas* are partless fundamental entities, they do not have extension nor shape (see *AKBh* IV.3c, where Vasubandhu argues that fundamental entities cannot have shape or length). The only alternative that would allow *paramāṇus* to be shaped is the view that each *paramāṇu* is a partite particle made of *dharmas*, which is the position that the Vaibhāṣikas endorse. But this is not Vasubandhu’s position, for he spends most of *AKBh* I arguing against this Vaibhāṣika view (see *AKBh* I.20, where he rejects the Vaibhāṣika argument that individual material forms (*rūpa*) are aggregates and argues that they must be singular *dharmas* instead). Also see the discussion directly before this one at *AKBh* I.43d, where he disagrees with the Vaibhāṣikas about the problem of contact, arguing that ‘If [*paramāṇus*] were to touch completely, things would coalesce. Then suppose instead that they were to touch at one spot. There would be the unwanted result that they have parts—and *paramāṇus* do not have parts.’ (*AKBh* I.43d(4)) Since particles are partite, Vasubandhu cannot be treating *paramāṇus* as particles at this point in the *AKBh*. (See my full translation of this passage in Carpenter with Ngaserin.) Indeed, it is only in *AKBh* II.22 that Vasubandhu proceeds—with ample clarification (‘from which it should not be understood as the other one’; *yato na anyataro vijñāyeta*)—to discuss *paramāṇus* as aggregated atoms (*saṃghātāṇu*) or particles. This also resolves Cabézon’s concern that these individual particles of the bodily faculty (i.e., *indriya* over touch) would contradictorily need to be both body-shaped and genitalia-shaped: Vasubandhu’s answer would simply be that individual atoms have no shape.

object that any collection cannot be fundamentally real, attributing the so-called ‘power’ of the *indriyas* to individual atoms instead—they are both in agreement that the three *indriyas* above are material in nature, and that this nature is accounted for by the fundamentally real atoms that they are made of.

This framing of the *indriyas* over gender as touch-receptors on the genitals deviates significantly from the view expressed in the suttas. As we saw in the previous chapters, what was defined as being *indriya* or most powerful over gender in the *Samyoga Sutta* and the *Indriya-vibhaṅga* consistently included things that could not possibly be part of these touch-receptors, including the attire (*ākappa*) we wear and the adornments (*ālankāra*) with which we decorate our bodies. Indeed, there is no reasonable sense in which the full list of things that are enumerated as being *indriya* over gender in the suttas could be part of or attributed to these bodily touch-receptors.

When Vasubandhu relays the Vaibhāṣika definition of these touch-receptors which are *indriya* over gender, we see how the list of things that these touch-receptors are *indriya* or powerful over has transformed in the many centuries between the initial Pāli texts and the establishment of the orthodox Vaibhāṣika view. The early Pāli texts consistently include six or more potential features that we could conceivably attend to and inaccurately label as ‘belonging to man’ or ‘belonging to woman’. They were more interested in providing variation and breadth in what appeared on any single list than they were in ensuring word-for-word uniformity across lists. As the *Indriya-vibhaṅga* notes, *indriya* over woman is simply a placeholder term for ‘whatever is most powerful over woman’, suggesting that the specific things listed are not as important as our ability to irrationally mentally generate them as belonging to a woman self or man self. Thus, the Pāli lists could as easily include ‘penis’ and ‘vagina’ (included under ‘shape’ or *liṅga*) as it could

include ‘dhotī’ and ‘sārī’ (included under ‘attire’ or *ākappa*); and it could arguably include ‘pink’ and ‘blue’ or ‘cars’ and ‘dolls’ as well.

This kind of variation and breadth of listed features is no longer present in the Vaibhāṣika definition that Vasubandhu inherits. Having defined what is *indriya* over gender as the bodily touch-receptors and only the touch-receptors, all the other things that were described as *indriya* over gender in the Pāli texts are automatically excluded. We see that not only do inconvenient elements of the initial Pāli lists like ‘attire’ and ‘adornment’ disappear entirely, but the powers of the touch-receptors that are *indriya* over gender have been altered and extended as well. While the *Samyoga Sutta* specified that the *indriyas* over gender were powerful over the psychological fettering to gendered selves, the Vaibhāṣikas specify that the collection of atoms that are *indriya* over gender are powerful in two ways:

Indriyas over woman, man, vitality, mind.²¹⁰ Each of these are the highest power over two things, which in the case of the *indriyas* over woman and man, extends over the division (*bheda*) and conceptual distinction (*vikalpa*) between sentient beings. There, ‘division between sentient beings’ (*sattva-bheda*) is ‘woman’ and ‘man’. ‘Conceptual distinction between sentient beings’ (*sattva-vikalpa*) is their difference in (i) shape, such as breasts, (ii) voice, and (iii) behaviour.

strī-puruṣa-jīvita-mana-indriyāṇāṃ. *dvayor arthayoḥ pratyekam ādhipatyam. strī-puruṣēndriyayyos tāvat sattva-bheda-vikalpayoḥ. tatra sattva-bhedaḥ strī puruṣa iti. sattva-vikalpaḥ stanādi-samsthāna-svarācārānyathātvam. (AKBh II.1)*

Here, the first way that the touch-receptors on the genitals exercise highest power over gender is their power to cause a materially-based division (*bheda*) between sentient beings. The word *bheda*

²¹⁰ Here, notice that Vasubandhu also uses the reorganised Vaibhāṣika listing of the twenty-two *indriyas*, where *indriya* over mind appears after *indriyas* over woman, man, and vitality in ninth place instead of before them in sixth place.

is significant, for it is the same word that is used in not only the *Parivīmaṃsana Sutta*'s discussion of the breaking (*bheda*) of the pot and the body, but also in the Abhidharma criterion for physical reducibility. According to the latter, the physical act of breaking the pot revealed that it had real parts, and here the fundamentally real collection of atoms that make up the touch-receptors account for a division or 'splitting' between sentient beings into the categories of 'woman' and 'man'. A physical distinction between sentient beings seems to occur simply by virtue of the different arrangement of the atoms of each type of touch-receptor—certain humans have atoms arranged like the shell of a drum; certain humans have atoms arranged like a thumb.

We also see from the full description of the second way that these collections of atoms were theorised by the Vaibhāṣikas to exercise highest power that they were thought to be the highest power over other features as well. Where the first power was over physical division, the second power of this collection of atoms is related to being the basis upon which gendered conceptual distinctions arise. Here, three of the features that were originally listed in the Pāli texts reappear, but not as things that are *indriya* over gender. Rather, they are now described as things over which these *indriyas* are powerful. Specifically, these two collections of atoms are responsible for fundamentally real differences in (1) bodily shape (*saṃsthāna*), e.g., in some humans having chests and others having breasts, (2) voice (*svara*) type, and (3) behaviours or ways of life (*ācāra*). And the fundamentally real distinctions that are created by these collections of atoms are the very basis (*āśraya*) of our cognising of these conceptual distinctions.

Here, we see another deviation from the sutta position about *indriyas* over gender. Where it was previously the case in the suttas that our labelling of various worldly features as gendered was portrayed to be irrational and inaccurate, the Vaibhāṣikas suggest that the conceptual distinctions we make along gendered lines are accurate. This is a deliberate change on the

Vaibhāṣikas’ part, for they were unconvinced that it was possible for gendered distinctions to arise unless there was a fundamentally real basis for our subsequent conceptualisation of these distinctions.

We see Vasubandhu raising this argument later in the chapter. Here, he reports the Vaibhāṣika argument that fundamental entities which are *sabhāgatās* or ‘causes of similarity’ are needed to account for our ideas of men and women, etc. These entities have the quality (-*tā*) of being the cause (*bhāga*) of similarity (*sa*) within sentient beings or a subset of sentient beings.²¹¹

‘Cause of similarity’ (*sabhāgatā*) is the name of a fundamental entity accounting for similarity among sentient beings. Although this is called ‘similarity among sentient beings’ (*nikāya-sabhāga*) in the *Śāstra*, they mean the same thing.

sabhāgatā nāma dravyam. sattvānām sādrśyaṃ nikāya-sabhāga ity asyāḥ śāstre saṃjñā.

(AKBh II.41a)

Saṅghabhadra confirms this construal in his commentary on this line:

Here, bodies, shapes, behaviours, desires are similar to each other, thus they are called *sa* (‘同’; ‘similar’). *Bhāga* (分) means ‘cause’ (因). There are distinct fundamental entities which are that cause of similarity, thus they are called ‘*sabhāgatā*’ (‘cause of similarity’).

此中身形業用樂欲展轉相似，故名為同。分是因義，有別實物是此同因，故名同分。(T1562 p500a27-28)

Causes of similarity among sentient beings come in two types: non-dividing (*abhinna*) and dividing (*bhinna*). The non-dividing cause of similarity accounts for the similarities found in all sentient beings; the dividing cause of similarity accounts for similarities among specific subsets of

²¹¹ AKBh II.41a: “‘Cause of similarity’ (*sabhāgatā*) is the name of a fundamental entity accounting for similarity among beings. Although this is called ‘similarity of beings’ (*nikāya-sabhāga*) in the *Śāstra*, they mean the same thing’ (*sabhāgatā nāma dravyam. sattvānām sādrśyaṃ nikāya-sabhāga ity asyāḥ śāstre saṃjñā*).

sentient beings. Here is Vasubandhu's explanation of the Vaibhāṣikas' general argument for the real existence of causes of similarity:

If similarity among sentient beings did not exist as a non-particular fundamental entity, then when sentient beings are divided (*bhinna*) by the similarity (*abhedena*) of particular [sentient beings] to one another, 'sentient beings' would not exist as an idea, nor would they exist as a conceptual designation. In the same way, concepts and ideas like 'aggregates', etc., must be connected!

yadi sattva-sabhāgatā dravyam aviśiṣṭam na syāt anyônya-viśeṣa-bhinneṣu sattveṣu sattva-sattva ity abhedena buddhir na syāt prajñaptiś ca. evaṃ skandhādi buddhi-prajñaptayo 'pi yojyāḥ. (AKBh II.41a)

This argument uses the concept of 'sentient beings' as an example, showing that the existence of this concept necessitates the existence of fundamental entities which are able to account for its arising. We are invited to apply this very same framework to other things which require causes of similarity. In the case of gender, the Vaibhāṣikas would begin by pointing out that we have concepts of 'woman' and 'man'. How did these concepts arise within us? Take the idea of 'woman'. For such an idea to exist, we must have inferred it. How do we make inferences? We group together particular sentient beings with similar characteristics (i.e., shape, voice, behaviours) by excluding all the particular sentient beings that do not have these characteristics. Once we have distinguished these conceptually from all the irrelevant sentient beings, the idea of 'woman' is generated within us.

Now, consider a scenario where there were no fundamental entities accounting for the presence of this same distinct set of characteristics across particular sentient beings. In this scenario, the Vaibhāṣikas claim that every particular sentient being would be idiosyncratic. If we carried out the same inferential process by systematically distinguishing them from the ones that

share no similarities, we would end up having excluded everything, and there would be nothing to group together at all. The concept of ‘woman’ would never have arisen within us—it ‘would not exist as an idea’. Since we do in fact have this concept of ‘woman’, the Vaibhāṣikas conclude that there must be a fundamental entity that accounts for the similar characteristics among women, and likewise for men.

And this is where Saṅghabhadra proceeds to link dividing causes of similarity to the *indriyas*:

It was stated that even though body and shape are the effects of similar actions, [dividing causes of similarity are still discrete fundamental entities] since there are differences in the various *indriyas*, behaviours, nutriments, etc.

謂見身形是更相似業所引果，諸根業用及飲食等有差別故。(T1562 p400b25-26)

Here, Saṅghabhadra acknowledges that differences in body and shape can be influenced by previous actions. Indeed, the shape of my body and the state of my body change constantly due to my own actions, the actions of others, and other conditions; my desires and behaviours and actions are shaped in this way as well. However, there are certain differences—namely, differences in *indriyas*, behaviours, and nutriments that are due specifically to fundamentally real dividing causes of similarity. Thus, the relationship between the dividing cause of similarity and the *indriyas* is established.

In the case of *indriyas* over gender, the fundamentally real cause of similarity for women explains why the same kind of *indriya* over woman is found in the bodies of multiple sentient beings, and likewise for that of men. This, then, is why *indriya* over woman is not only able to determine the shape, voice, and behaviour of one individual, but by virtue of being present across an entire subset of sentient beings, is able to result in a legitimate grouping of individuals called ‘women’ who have similar shapes, voices, and behaviours.

Thus, based on Anderson's definition of the term, the Vaibhāṣikas are gender essentialists. They believe that gender is innate and inborn, in the sense that every sentient being has a collection of atoms on their genitals which are collectively responsible for creating a real division between women and men, leading to our accurate grasping of individuals as having gendered shapes, voices, and behaviours, and legitimising the conceptual distinctions that are made between women and men.

3.5 Vasubandhu and the *indriyas* over sex

Like the Vaibhāṣikas, Vasubandhu inherited the framework of subsuming the *indriyas* over gender under the *indriya* over touch, grouping the *indriyas* over gender together with the five sensory bases. But unlike the Vaibhāṣikas, Vasubandhu took the materiality of these *indriyas* as a reason to limit the many powers that the Vaibhāṣikas attributed to these five sensory *indriyas*. If these *indriyas* are made of material atoms, then why would they be the highest power over our thoughts and thought concomitants when mind is one of the possible candidates?

Thus, we see Vasubandhu taking the side of the Vijñānavādins ('followers of the mind-only view') against the Vaibhāṣikas in this matter. After explaining the Vijñānavādin objection to the Vaibhāṣikas, Vasubandhu adds his own observation that the material *indriyas* over sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch are not even capable of being the highest power over seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touch:

Because of a state of obstruction, there is no seeing of concealed form by the eye. Then what is it that sees? When even form is concealed, there is no obstruction of seeing; here it is only consciousness related to the eye which produces seeing.

*sapratighatvāc cakṣuṣa āvṛtasya rūpasya adarśanam. kiṃ tarhi. yatrā ālokasya
apratibandha āvṛte 'pi rupe tatrā upapadyata eva cakṣur-vijñānam. (AKBh I.42)*

Vasubandhu argues that to call the five *indriyas* over seeing, hearing, smell, taste, and touch *indriyas* in the first place is a misnomer: they are not even the highest powers over their professed domains. Instead, Vasubandhu takes it to be preferable to understand seeing, hearing, smell, taste, and touch etc., as activities that are performed by the mind or consciousness (*vijñāna*) instead. At the end of *AKBh* II.1, he responds to the many powers that the Vaibhāṣikas attribute to the sensory *indriyas*—e.g., seeing, identifying potential dangers or harms—by arguing that all of these would belong to consciousness as well. Thus, it might be more accurate to translate Vasubandhu's versions of these five *indriyas* as eye *indriya*, ear *indriya*, nose *indriya*, tongue *indriya*, body *indriya*.

So where the *indriya* over gender are concerned, it can be anticipated that any powers which might be better performed by consciousness would be attributed to consciousness instead. Indeed, when Vasubandhu proceeds to provide his own definition of the *indriyas* over gender, there are some noticeable changes compared to the Vaibhāṣika definition above. It begins as a reiteration of points that Vasubandhu and the Vaibhāṣika agree about:

Regarding *indriya* over woman and *indriya* over man, the two are conceptually made to stand apart from the body *indriya*, and they do not exist as a distinct entity. This is a certain part of the body *indriya* at the nether region which is understood to be called 'indriya over woman or man'.

*kāyēndriyād eva strī-puruṣēndriye pṛthak vyavasthāpyete. na arthāntara-bhūte. kaścīd
asau kāyēndriya-bhāga upastha pradeśo yaḥ strī-puruṣēndriyākhyāṃ pratilabhate. (AKBh
II.2)*

Vasubandhu follows this up with a new explanation of that over which these two *indriyas* are powerful:

It is called this appropriately, because it is *ādhipatyā* ('highly powerful') over the state of being a woman and the state of being a man. Here, being a woman means physical form belonging to woman, voice belonging to woman, gait belonging to woman, and sexual sensation belonging to woman. This certainly applies to the state of being a man for a man.

yathā-kramam strī-tva-puṃstvayor ādhipatyāt. tatra strī-bhāvaḥ striyākṛtiḥ svara-ceṣṭā abhiprāyāḥ. etad dhi puṃsaḥ puṃstvam. (AKBh II.2)

Where the Vaibhāṣikas attributed the powers of creating real division (*bheda*) and causing accurate conceptual distinctions (*vikalpa*) to the *indriyas*, we see that Vasubandhu rejects that framing of the powers of the *indriyas* entirely. Not only is the power over causing conceptual distinctions taken away from the *indriyas* over gender, but the terminology related to division (*bheda*) disappears as well. Vasubandhu asserts that the only things that these two *indriyas* are powerful over is *strī-tva* and *puṃstva*. *Strī* and *puṃs* are nouns meaning woman and man, and the suffix *-tva* forms an abstract noun, which could translate as 'X-ness' or 'state of being X'. Because Vasubandhu proceeds to substitute the *-tva* for the word *bhava* ('state of being'; 'being'), I translate *strī-tva* as 'state of being *strī*' and *puṃstva* as 'state of being *puṃs*'. I provisionally translate these as 'state of being a woman' and 'state of being a man'.

Here, Vasubandhu seems to have made an effort to align his reading with the kind of account we find in the suttas, which specify that these *indriyas* are powerful over fettering to the woman self (*itth-attan*) and man self (*puris-attan*). His received understanding that these *indriyas* are material drives him to reject another aspect of their account, and to deviate from the suttas in identifying them as being powerful over the state of being a woman or man, and not a woman self or man self. After all, psychological self-making involves making conceptual distinctions between

‘internal to self’ and ‘external to self’; and mental labelling involves drawing conceptual distinctions between ‘belonging to woman’ and ‘belonging to man’. Since Vasubandhu has already rejected the Vaibhāṣika view that these material *indriyas* are powerful over conceptual distinctions, these *indriyas* cannot be powerful over the woman self or man self.

Vasubandhu’s delegation of all mental activities to the consciousness instead of these material *indriyas* leads to some noticeable changes to the definition of what ‘being a woman (*strī*)’ means. When we compare it to the Vaibhāṣika definition which encompasses physical attributes (shape, voice) and behavioural attributes (behaviour, way of life), it seems that Vasubandhu not only has added more physical attributes (gait, sexual sensation), but he has also opted to entirely omit behavioural attributes from his definition. Thus, what we get with Vasubandhu is a novel and concerted effort to create a distinction between biological sex and gender: the former is explained by these material *indriyas*, and anything to do with the latter is relegated to activities of the consciousness instead. For this reason, I suggest translating Vasubandhu’s version of the *indriyas* over gender as *indriyas* over sex instead. Based on this, I offer a revised translation of Vasubandhu’s account of these two *indriyas*:

Regarding the female *indriya* and the male *indriya*, the two are conceptually made to stand apart from the body *indriya*, and they do not exist as a distinct entity. This is a certain part of the body *indriya* at the nether region which is understood to be called ‘female or male *indriya*’. It is called this appropriately, because it is *ādhipatya* (‘highly powerful’) over the state of being female and the state of being male. Here, being female means female physical form, female voice, female gait, and female sexual sensation. This certainly applies to the state of being male for a male individual.

kāyēndriyād eva strī-puruṣēndriye pṛthak vyavasthāpyete. na arthāntara-bhūte. kaścid asau kāyēndriya-bhāga upastha pradeśo yaḥ strī-puruṣēndriyākhyāṃ pratilabhate. yathā-

*kramaṃ strīva-puṃstvayor ādhipatyāt. tatra strī-bhāvaḥ striyākṛtiḥ svara-ceṣṭā
abhiprāyāḥ. etad dhi puṃsaḥ puṃstvam. (AKBh II.2)*

At this point, Vasubandhu has established that these *indriyas* over sex govern the distinction between being female or being male. I have yet to address his use of the term ‘*ādhipatyā*’ instead of ‘*indriya*’ to describe the power that these *indriyas* have. In chapter 1, I mentioned that Vasubandhu offered the following *nirvacana* definition of *indriya*:

‘*Idi*’ means ‘being in a state of highest power’. *Indriyas* mean ‘They are in a state of highest power over some “it”’.

“*idi paramaiśvarye*”. *tasya indanti iti indriyāṇi. (AKBh II.1)*

This is a textbook linguistic definition of *indriya*, and this also means that it is not particularly helpful in giving us insight into the nature of the power or powers that these *indriyas* supposedly have. This makes it a good definition for the purposes of debate, since the disagreement between the Vaibhāṣikas, the Vijñānavādins, and Vasubandhu himself are specifically related to determining the nature and scope of these powers. However, even in this introductory portion of the text, we see Vasubandhu taking steps to set up his own take on the powers of these *indriyas*. Right after he provides this definition, he notes that *indriya* (highly powerful) is synonymous with *ādhipatyā* (highly powerful):

The meanings of *indriya* and *ādhipatyā* are synonymous.

ādhipatyārtha indriyārthaḥ. (AKBh II.1)

Providing synonyms is a standard part of explaining a term, and there is nothing about providing this synonym that would be controversial to his Vaibhāṣika opponents. But once Vasubandhu has refuted the Vaibhāṣika position and moved on to providing his own definition of the *indriyas* over sex, we see that he specifically picked this synonym for a reason. The prefix *adhi-* in *ādhipatyā* reads as ‘above’ or ‘over and above’, leading to its common meaning as ‘highly powerful’. But

the prefix *adhi-* also means ‘after’, which means that it is also possible to read *ādhipatyā* as ‘being powerful over what comes after’. This is the meaning that Vasubandhu leans into when he proceeds to define *ādhipatyā*:

In fact, ‘*ādhipatyā*’ means ‘being produced (*bhūta*) before (*pra*) what is subsequent (*adhikam*). The eye *indriya* is in a state of power over what is subsequent—the grasping of material form by the eye *indriya*.

adhikaṃ hi prabhutvam ādhipatyam. cakṣuṣaś cakṣū-rūpōpalabdhāv adhikam aiśvaryam.

(*AKBh* II.2)

Here, Vasubandhu makes the move of indicating a temporal relationship between the *indriyas* and ‘what is subsequent’. The *indriyas* come into being first, and when it is said that they are ‘powerful’ over grasping, this means that where these *indriyas* are produced, grasping subsequently occurs.²¹² At this point, the exact nature of this ‘power’ is not yet confirmed, though we might already know where Vasubandhu is going with this based on his appeal to non-obstructing causes (*kāraṇa-hetus*) in his earlier refutation of the Vaibhāṣika view that collections of atoms are fundamental entities. Indeed, Vasubandhu proceeds at *AKBh* II.62cd to use the word ‘*ādhipatyā*’ to characterise the “prior condition” (*adhipati-pratyaya*), claiming that this condition is equivalent to the non-obstructing cause or ‘*kāraṇa-hetu*’—‘the prior condition is indeed the same as non-obstructing cause’.²¹³ Thus, any mention of ‘powers’ is scrubbed from Vasubandhu’s final definition of the *indriyas*—there is not some active power or ability that an *indriya*, collection of *dharmas*, or individual *dharma* has; all that is occurring on a fundamental level is a successive arising of individual *dharmas*, where the only answer to ‘why did this *dharma* arise?’ is ‘no existing *dharma*

²¹² Note also that this subsequently-occurring mechanical grasping (*upalabdha*) has replaced the Vaibhāṣika’s use of seeing (*darśana*) as the power of the *indriya*. Likewise for the body *indriya* and the gender *indriyas*, where power over the sensory activity of touching is replaced by this mechanical grasping.

²¹³ In Sanskrit: *ya eva kāraṇa-hetuḥ sa eva adhipati-pratyayaḥ.*

obstructed its arising.’ In this respect, Vasubandhu goes further than the Vaibhāṣikas or the Vijñānavādins did on this matter. After siding with the Vijñānavādins against the Vaibhāṣikas, he ultimately chooses to align himself with the Sautrāntikas:

On this matter, the Sautrāntikas said: Are they not trying to eat the air? “Depending on the eye *indriya* and material forms, there is the arising of consciousness about seeing.” In that example, how could there be seeing or being seen? This is certainly not an activity; there are only *dharmas* and only cause and effect. In that example, desiring a customary usage, a figurative expression is created. Here, one should not cling to “the eye *indriya* sees” or “the consciousness cognises”.

atra sautrāntikā āhuḥ. kim idam ākāśaṃ khādyate. cakṣur hi pratītya rūpāṇi ca utpadyate cakṣur-vijñānam. tatra kaḥ paśyati ko vā dṛśyate. nirvyāpāraṃ hi idaṃ dharma-mātraṃ hetu-phala-mātraṃ ca. tatra vyavahārārthaṃ cchandata upacārāḥ kriyante. cakṣuḥ paśyati vijñānaṃ vijānāti iti na atra abhiniveṣṭavyam. (AKBh I.42)

Thus, Vasubandhu’s final view dissolves the notion that *indriyas* are powers in any fundamental sense. And even when it comes to the individual atoms of the *indriyas* over sex, their so-called non-obstructing causal “powers” are far more passive and indirect than something like efficient causal powers would be. Not only are we left with the most limited account of material *indriyas* that has been presented thus far, strictly restricting their powers to biological sex alone and instead attributing all powers over psychological gendered selves to consciousness; we are also left with the most deflationary account of these *indriyas*’ ‘powers’ so far.

And Vasubandhu does not stop here, for he proceeds at *AKBh* II.41a to refute the Vaibhāṣika view that there are fundamentally real causes of similarity (*sabhāgatā*). Thus, not only are the *indriyas* stripped of any meaningful powers, there is also no fundamental entity that ensures that these *indriyas* are distributed across sentient beings in a uniform way. If so, there is no

fundamental reason to believe that what we call a ‘female *indriya*’ is in fact the same or even similar across all individuals whom we have assigned as female, nor is there a reason to believe that what we call a ‘male *indriya*’ is uniform across all assigned male individuals. All we can signal from the presence of a sex *indriya* is that it seems to be correlated with subsequent changes in physical form, voice, gait, and sexual sensation. And as we see from Vasubandhu’s acknowledgement of intersex individuals (*ubhaya-vyañjana*) and other individuals who are taken to either have both or neither of the female *indriya* and male *indriya* (*AKBh* II.1), there are a surplus of edge cases and intermediary cases that make it such that ‘being female’ (*strītvā*) and ‘being male’ (*pumstvā*) are incomplete categories which fail to exhaust the possible options for biological sex.

3.6 Towards an idealist metaphysics of gender

The Vaibhāṣika’s materialist view of the *indriyas* over gender was a significant deviation from the initial psychological view in the suttas. However, there are ways in which Vasubandhu’s response of (1) severely limiting the powers of these *indriyas* to the most minimal account of biological sex possible, while also (2) acknowledging that ‘being female’ and ‘being male’ cannot be uniform across individuals, and (3) returning all so-called ‘powers’ over gendered self-making to the *dharmas* that we associate with consciousness or mind, restores many aspects of the psychological view of gender that was found in the initial suttas. It is, however, still its own distinct view that is not only articulated using resources from the Abhidharma metaphysical framework, but also seems to offer—for the first time in the Buddhist accounts of gender surveyed in this dissertation—a dualist view on which material *dharmas* or atoms associated with the body *indriya* are non-

obstructing causes for biological sex and mental *dharmas* associated with consciousness are non-obstructing causes for psychological gendered selves.

Given Vasubandhu's innovations, it is unsurprising that his Sautrāntika view received traction, and that Vasubandhu's *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya*, which is itself a commentary on the root verses he composed, was subsequently the subject of many commentaries from various Buddhist schools and traditions. We have seen excerpts from the Vaibhāṣika Saṅghabhadra's commentary of the *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya* in this chapter, showing that at least some Vaibhāṣikas found Vasubandhu's view concerning and also interesting enough to warrant the composition of a verse-by-verse commentary and refutation. Indeed, the biography of Vasubandhu by Xuánzàng—whose Chinese translations of the *Mahā-vibhāṣa* and *Nyayānusāra* feature in this chapter—report that Saṅghabhadra dedicated twelve years of his life to produce two commentaries in response to the *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya*.²¹⁴

But Xuánzàng also reports that by the time Saṅghabhadra was ready to publicly challenge Vasubandhu to a debate, Vasubandhu was no longer interested in defending his views in the *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya* and declined Saṅghabhadra's challenge.²¹⁵ For by then, Vasubandhu was an elderly man who had long abandoned his affiliations with Abhidharma. We saw, for example, multiple instances in the *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya* where he was frustrated with the Vaibhāṣika tendency to reify all sorts of things as fundamental entities, and he often sympathised with the Vijñānavādins in rejecting the range of causal powers that the Vaibhāṣikas attributed to material *dharmas* or atoms, arguing that such functions were better performed by consciousness instead. And some time after his composition of the *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya*, Vasubandhu

²¹⁴ Beal 193.

²¹⁵ Beal 193.

became increasingly concerned about the partless atoms that he endorsed as fundamental entities in the *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya*. He composed the *Vimśatikā* ('Twenty Verses'), declaring his alignment with the Yogācāra school and leaving the Abhidharma tradition for the Mahāyāna tradition instead.

In the *Vimśatikā*, Vasubandhu endorses the idealist mind-only view (*citta-mātra*) of the Yogācārins, arguing that there is no good reason to posit that atoms—and with it, any material entities—exist. The one thing that atoms are supposed to account for is our experience of material things as extended through space, and Vasubandhu argues in *Vimśatikā* 11 that they are unable to perform this job. In this sense, it seems that the Vaibhāṣika instinct that individual atoms were insufficient to account for our experience of the material world was shared by Vasubandhu. But where the Vaibhāṣikas leaned on collections of atoms, Vasubandhu dismissed that option as well. So even if atoms were real, Vasubandhu claims that they would not be able to act as a non-obstructing cause for *anything*. And if mental *dharmas* are able to account for all this and more, why should the existence of atoms be posited at all?

Vasubandhu introduced a novel distinction between sex and gender based on a corresponding metaphysical dualism between atoms and mental *dharmas*. But he then proceeded to denounce this view and Abhidharma altogether, moving on to become a prominent Mahāyāna scholar. Here, it is unfortunate that he does not revisit the metaphysics of gender in any of the Yogācārin works that we have from him.²¹⁶ Still, it is likely that he would have endorsed a fully idealist account of both sex and gender. If so, an intellectual trajectory could be charted from the mental account of gender in the suttas to the materialist account of gender or sex within Abhidharma, and then back to a fully mental account of gender in Yogācāra once again.

²¹⁶ See Li for such an attempt at innovating upon Yogācāra philosophy to expand the Buddhist feminist project.

Appendix

SUTTA ON FETTERING AND UNFETTERING (AN 7.51)

[i] **Introduction.** “Mendicants, I am going to teach you a formulation of the teaching on fettering (*saṃyoga*) and unfettering (*visaṃyoga*). Listen [and attend properly to what I am going to say.]”

“Yes, venerable one,” the mendicants responded to the venerable one.

The venerable one said the following:]²¹⁷ “And what, mendicants, is this formulation of the teaching of fettering and unfettering?”

saṃyoga-visaṃyogaṃ vo, bhikkhave, dhamma-pariyāyaṃ desessāmi. taṃ suṇātha ...pe... katamo ca so, bhikkhave, saṃyogo visaṃyogo dhamma-pariyāyo?

TEACHING ON FETTERING

[ii] **Fettering to ‘Woman’ as Self.** “Mendicants, a woman mentally generates (*manasi karoti*) as internal to self what is *indriya* over ‘woman’—[where what is *indriya* is]²¹⁸ behaviour belonging to ‘woman’, attire belonging to ‘woman’, thinking belonging to ‘woman’, desire belonging to ‘woman’, voice belonging to

²¹⁷ The Pāli manuscript only has ‘*taṃ suṇātha... pe...*’, or ‘listen to this... *pe...*’ Here, *pe* is an abbreviation for *peyyāla*, which signals a sentence or passage that is so commonly repeated throughout the suttas that there is no need to write it out in full. The full passage would read: *taṃ suṇātha, sādhukaṃ manasi karotha, bhāssissāmi iti. evaṃ, bhante ‘ti, kho te bhikkhū bhagavato paccassosum. bhagavā etad avoca* (repeated nearly everywhere, but see *SN 22.7; MN 138; AN 4.180*, etc.). Thus, I have included this full passage in square brackets.

²¹⁸ I add this clarification to make it clear in the English that, grammatically, what is defined within the em-dash is ‘what is *indriya*’ and not ‘woman’ or ‘man’.

‘woman’, adornment belonging to ‘woman’. She becomes attached to that and indulges in that.

itthī, bhikkhave, ajjhattaṃ itth-indriyaṃ manasi karoti—itthi-kuttaṃ itth-ākappaṃ itthi-vidhaṃ itth-icchandaṃ itthi-ssaraṃ itth-ālaṅkāraṃ. sā tattha rajjati tatra abhiramati.

[iii] Fettering to ‘Man’ as Not-Self. “Having become attached to that and having indulged in that, she mentally generates as external [to self] what is *indriya* over ‘man’—[where what is *indriya* is] behaviour belonging to ‘man’, attire belonging to ‘man’, thinking belonging to ‘man’, desire belonging to ‘man’, voice belonging to ‘man’, adornment belonging to ‘man’. She becomes attached to that and indulges in that. Having become attached to that and having indulged in that, she desires a fetter to what is external [to self]. She desires happiness and delight which arises for herself as a result of this fetter. Mendicants, these sentient beings have indulged in a ‘woman self’ and have undergone a fettering to ‘man’. In this way, mendicants, a woman does not escape the ‘woman self’.

sā tattha rattā tatra abhiratā bahiddhā puris-indriyaṃ manasi karoti—purisa-kuttaṃ purisākappaṃ purisa-vidhaṃ purisa-cchandaṃ purisa-ssaraṃ puris-ālaṅkāraṃ. sā tattha rajjati tatra abhiramati. sā tattha rattā tatra abhiratā bahiddhā saṃyogaṃ ākaṅkhati. yañcassā saṃyoga-paccayā uppajjati sukhaṃ somanassaṃ tañca ākaṅkhati. itth-atte, bhikkhave, abhiratā sattā purisesu saṃyogaṃ gatā. evaṃ kho, bhikkhave, itthī itth-attaṃ na ativattati.

[iv] Fettering to ‘Man’ as Self. “Mendicants, a man mentally generates as internal to self (*ajjhatta*) what is *indriya* over ‘man’—[where what is *indriya* is] behaviour

belonging to ‘man’, attire belonging to ‘man’, thinking belonging to ‘man’, desire belonging to ‘man’, voice belonging to ‘man’, adornment belonging to ‘man’. He becomes attached to that and indulges in that.

puriso, bhikkhave, ajjhattaṃ puris-indriyaṃ manasi karoti—purisa-kuttaṃ puris-ākappaṃ purisa-vidhaṃ purisa-cchandaṃ purisa-ssaraṃ puris-ālāṅkāraṃ. so tattha rajjati tatra abhiraṃati. so tattha rajjati tatra abhiraṃati.

[v] Fettering to ‘Woman’ as Not-Self. “Having become attached to that and having indulged in that, he mentally generates as external [to self] what is *indriya* over ‘woman’—[where what is *indriya* is] behaviour belonging to ‘woman’, attire belonging to ‘woman’, thinking belonging to ‘woman’, desire belonging to ‘woman’, voice belonging to ‘woman’, adornment belonging to ‘woman’. He becomes attached to that and indulges in that. Having become attached to that and having indulged in that, he desires a fetter to what is external [to self]. He desires happiness and delight which arises for himself as a result of this fetter. Mendicants, these sentient beings have indulged in a ‘man self’ and have undergone a fettering to ‘woman’. In this way, mendicants, a man does not escape the ‘man self’.

so tattha ratta tatrābhirato bahiddhā itthindriyaṃ manasi karoti—itthikuttaṃ itthākappaṃ itthividhaṃ itthicchandaṃ itthissaraṃ itthālāṅkāraṃ. So tattha ratta tatrābhirato bahiddhā saṃyogaṃ ākaṅkhati. yañcassa saṃyogapaccayā uppajjati sukhaṃ somanassaṃ tañca ākaṅkhati. purisatte, bhikkhave, abhiratā sattā itthīsu saṃyogaṃ gatā. Evaṃ kho, bhikkhave, puriso purisattaṃ nātivattati.

[vi] Teaching of Fettering Ends. “That, mendicants, is what fettering is like. And now, mendicants, what is unfettering like?”

evaṃ kho, bhikkhave, saṃyogo hoti. kathaṅ ca, bhikkhave, viṣaṃyogo hoti?

TEACHING ON UNFETTERING

[vii] Unfettering from ‘Woman’ as Self. “Mendicants, a woman does not mentally generate (*manasi karoti*) as internal to self (*ajjhatta*) what is *indriya* over ‘woman’—[where what is *indriya* is] behaviour belonging to ‘woman’, attire belonging to ‘woman’, thinking belonging to ‘woman’, desire belonging to ‘woman’, voice belonging to ‘woman’, adornment belonging to ‘woman’. She does not become attached to that and does not indulge in that.

itthī, bhikkhave, ajjhattaṃ itth-indriyaṃ na manasi karoti—itthi-kuttaṃ itth-ākappaṃ itthi-vidhaṃ itthi-cchandaṃ itthi-ssaraṃ itth-ālaṅkāraṃ. sā tattha na rajjati, sā tatra na abhiraṃati.

[viii] Unfettering from ‘Man’ as Not-Self. “Having not become attached to that and having not indulged in that, she does not mentally generate what is *indriya* over ‘man’ as external [to self]—[where what is *indriya* is] behaviour belonging to ‘man’, attire belonging to ‘man’, thinking belonging to ‘man’, desire belonging to ‘man’, voice belonging to ‘man’, adornment belonging to ‘man’. She does not become attached to that and does not indulge in that. Having not become attached to that and having not indulged in that, she does not desire a fetter to what is external [to self]. She does not desire happiness and delight which arises for herself as a result of this fetter. Mendicants, these sentient beings have not indulged in a

‘woman self’ and have not undergone a fettering to ‘man’. In this way, mendicants, a woman escapes the ‘woman self’.

*sā tattha arattā tatra anabhiratā bahiddhā puris-indriyaṃ na manasi karoti—
purisa-kuttaṃ puris-ākappaṃ purisa-vidhaṃ purisa-cchandaṃ purisa-ssaraṃ
puris-ālaṅkāraṃ. sā tattha na rajjati, tatra na abhiraṃati. sā tattha arattā tatra
anabhiratā bahiddhā saṃyogaṃ na akaṅkhati. yañcassā saṃyoga-paccayā
uppajjati sukhaṃ somanassaṃ tañca na akaṅkhati. itth-atte, bhikkhave, anabhiratā
sattā purisesu viṣaṃyogaṃ gatā. evaṃ kho, bhikkhave, itthī itthattaṃ ativattati.*

[ix] Unfettering from ‘Man’ as Self. “Mendicants, a man does not mentally generate (*manasi karoti*) what is *indriya* over ‘man’ as internal to self—[where what is *indriya* is] behaviour belonging to ‘man’, attire belonging to ‘man’, thinking belonging to ‘man’, desire belonging to ‘man’, voice belonging to ‘man’, adornment belonging to ‘man’. He does not become attached to that and does not indulge in that.

*Puriso, bhikkhave, ajjhattaṃ puris-indriyaṃ na manasi karoti—purisa-kuttaṃ
puris-ākappaṃ purisa-vidhaṃ purisa-cchandaṃ purisa-ssaraṃ puris-ālaṅkāraṃ.
So tattha na rajjati, so tatra na abhiraṃati.*

[x] Unfettering from ‘Woman’ as Not-Self. “Having not become attached to that and having not indulged in that, he does not mentally generate as external [to self] what is *indriya* over ‘woman’—[where what is *indriya* is] behaviour belonging to ‘woman’, attire belonging to ‘woman’, thinking belonging to ‘woman’, desire belonging to ‘woman’, voice belonging to ‘woman’, adornment belonging to ‘woman’. He does not become attached to that and does not indulge in that. Having

not become attached to that and having not indulged in that, he does not desire a fetter to what is external [to self]. He does not desire happiness and delight which arises for herself as a result of this fetter. Mendicants, these sentient beings have not indulged in a ‘man self’ and have not undergone a fettering to ‘woman’. In this way, mendicants, a man escapes the ‘man self’.

so tattha aratto tatra anabhirato bahiddhā itth-indriyaṃ na manasi karoti—itthi-kuttaṃ itth-ākappaṃ itthi-vidhaṃ itthi-cchandaṃ itthi-ssaraṃ itth-ālaṅkāraṃ. so tattha na rajjati, tatra na abhiraṃati. so tattha aratto tatra anabhirato bahiddhā saṃyogaṃ na akaṅkhati. yañcassa saṃyoga-paccayā uppajjati sukhaṃ somanassaṃ tañca na akaṅkhati. purisatte, bhikkhave, anabhiratā sattā itthīsu visaṃyogaṃ gatā. evaṃ kho, bhikkhave, puriso puris-attaṃ ativattati.

[xi] Teaching of Unfettering Ends. “That, mendicants, is what unfettering is like.

This was a formulation of the teaching on fettering (*saṃyoga*) and unfettering.”

evaṃ kho, bhikkhave, visaṃyogo hoti. ayaṃ kho, bhikkhave, saṃyogo visaṃyogo dhamma-pariyāyo”ti.

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