

On the idea of “avijñapti-karma” in Abhidharma Buddhism

Kyodo Yamada

It is well-known that, in the doctrine of karma, Buddhism denying the existence of the soul as the author of anything, the question of how the deed (karma) can bring its deserts (phala) became an issue. In fact, there were several attempts explaining the relation between the deed and its deserts in Abhidharma Buddhism. To mention some examples, we find the explanation by “upacaya” in the Mahāsaṅgikas, the one by “avipranāsa” in the Sammitiyas, and the one by “bīja” in the Sautrāntikas.

In this essay, we try to explicate the idea of “avijñapti”. The classification of karma into “vijñapti” (the making known) and “avijñapti” (the none making known) appears in the Abhidharma literatures, particularly in the Sarvāstivādin’s treatises. And avijñapti is thought by some to be parallel to the above-mentioned ideas, both subsisting after the deed was performed and thus functioning as the medium between the deed and its deserts. But it is thought by others to bear an entirely different meaning from them. Accordingly, we begin by enumerating the points of difference and similitude between the interpretations.

1. Difference

It is wrong to consider, so far as we conform to Sarvāstivādin’s orthodoxy that avijñapti functions as the medium between karma and its deserts as upacaya or avipranāsa does. It was established by Professors Wogiwara, Kato, and Funahashi.⁽¹⁾ According to the Professors, avijñapti denotes “a kind of habit acquired under a vow”.

a) In the Sarvāstivādin’s treatises such as the Jñānaprasthānaśāstra 發智論, the Mahāvibhāṣaśāstra 大毘婆沙論, the Abhidharmakośaśāstra and so on,

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avijñapti is considered as having only the virtue to restrain people from good or bad deeds, that is, the virtue to perform saṃvara or asaṃvara, but not as having the function of the medium between karma and its deserts.

b) In all the references made in the Karmasiddhyupakaraṇa 大乘成業論 by Vasubandhu and its commentary by Sumatīśīla,⁽²⁾ avijñapti is regarded in the same way as in the Abhidharmakośa, and concerning the questions of the fruits of karma, the Sarvāstivādins have the theory of reality of past karma, which presents a great contrast to the theories of upacaya, avipranāśa and bija.

c) In the section of Karma-phala-parikṣā in the Mūlamadhyamakārikā, Nāgārjuna refers only to avijñapti in terms of religious observance (śīla). When he treats of the problem of karma and its fruits, he refers to the theory of avipranāśa, but he does not refer to avijñapti.

From these data, we may say, in conclusion, that avijñapti is not identical with upacaya etc.

2. Similitude

a) In the Satyasiddhiprakaraṇa 成實論, of which the arguments have the Sautrāntika's coloring and which adopts the theory of Śūnyatā, Harivarman refers to avijñapti as functioning to bring the fruits of karma. To take an example, he says that a man is born to heaven by dint of avijñapti, which makes him desist from the killing etc. (after he took the vow). (Taisho. 32. p. 290a; 304a). Moreover, in the part of questions as to kāya-karma—this treatise being written in the form of questions and answers—

(1) cf. U. Wogiwara, 萩原雲來文集; S. Kato, Journal of Indian and Buddhist studies. vol I no. 2, 211-213.; I. Funahashi, 業の研究.

But one of the reasons the Professors gave that, being necessarily parted with at one's death, avijñapti can't subsist until karma brings its deserts in the future life, is open to discussion, for death is one of the occasions of destruction of avipranāśa, which is the medium between karma and its deserts, according to Madhyamakakārikā XVII. 19.

(2) Taisho. 31; Tohoku Cat. no. 4062, 4071. cf. S. Yamaguchi's translation (世親の成業論).

wers—it says; “It is avijñapti (,not karma in general) that accumulates and brings the fruits of suffering or happiness. What is kaya-vijñapti?” (ibid. 289c). This shows that the view regarding avijñapti as medium between karma and its deserts passed current in his time (about III A. D.).

b) A similar view of avijñapti is found in the treatise 尊婆須蜜所集論 by Vasumitra, one of the famous great teachers of Sarvāstivādins in the Mahāvibhāṣa. One of several answers to the question of how one could know the existence of avijñapti, runs as follows; “We realise the existence of avijñapti after we are born in heaven. We are born in heaven after we have conformed to the morality (by dint of subsisting of avijñapti): (Taisho. 28. p. 725b.)

Consequently we may infer that there were some even among the Sarvāstivādins who held the same opinion regarding avijñapti as Harivarman did.

c) The theory of upacaya of the Mahāsaṅghikas is expounded in the Karmasiddhy-upakaraṇa and the Kathāvatthu and so on. Now, in the Kathāvatthu (chapter 10 with Buddhaghosa’s comm.) the explanation of saṃvara and asaṃvara, which is explained from the virtue of avijñapti in the Sarvāstivādins, is also founded on the theory of upacaya. Further, Āgama that they quote in corroboration of their explanation is the same one that Harivarman quotes in corroboration of avijñapti in his treatise (ibid. 無作品). The text runs as follows; “Those who plant trees in the gardens and in forests and bridge rivers, and those who build public drinking fountains, wells and rest-huts are constantly increasing their merits”. (S. N. vol. I. p. 33=雜阿舍 36.5 (Taisho. 2. 261b))

Moreover, an other Āgama which has similar contents is quoted in corroboration of avijñapti in the Abhidharmakośa. The Āgama says that, if a devotee, male or female, has performed the seven items of meritorious action, his merits increses incessantly, whether he is moving or standing still, or being seated or sleeping and so on.” (中阿舍•世間福經. Taisho. I. 427c)

Consequently, we think that upacaya and avijñapti, though they differ

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in detail according to schools and individual interpretations, take their rise in the same source.

d) In the treatise handed down in the chinese translations 隨相論 by Guṇamati, avipranāśa 無失法 is also found to play the same part as avijñapti in explaining śīla. (Taisho. 32. p. 161c. ff.)

3. Historical investigation

How can we explain the difference and similitude that we mentioned above? This is what we think: first, it is because the problem of karma's fruit in the Sarvāstivādins was explained on the ground of the famous theory that dharmas have reality in all times, that avijñapti was abandoned in so far as the problem of karma's fruit is concerned; in course of time the reflection on the character of avijñapti caused some people to regard it as having a function as the medium between karma and its deserts: secondly, upon this question an important historical light can be shed. That is to say, we can find a filiation between avijñapti and akṛta-karma, and one between upacaya and upacita-karma. This fact affords a clue to this question. Let us sketch here only the filiation between avijñapti and akṛta on account of limited space.

Karma is classified into kṛta and akṛta in the Yogācarabhūmi (ed. by V. Bhattacharya. p. 189=Taisho. 30. 319b). The text, concerning akṛta-karma, says briefly that “acetitam acetayitvā punar na kāyena na vācā samutthāpitam”, but in its chinese commentary, we find an interpretation that akṛta-karma (不作業) is avijñapti-karma (無表業)(an interpretation by 基在瑜伽略纂 Taisho. 43. p. 51b.)

This interpretation is possible, for in 雜阿毘曇心論, one of the Abhidharma treatises remaining in the chinese translations, akṛta (不作, doing actually nothing) is given as a synonym of avijñapti (無作⁽³⁾). And the text

(3) Taisho. 28. p. 888b. In 成實論 too, avijñapti and akṛta is used synonymous (Taisho. 32. p. 290a). Moreover, we find frequently a word “無作” (doing nothing) as one of the chinese equivalents to avijñapti, which originally means ‘not making known’. This shows that the translator had the consideration of the above-mentioned filiation.

says that bearing oneself so as not to do evil deeds or not to do good deeds is a sort of act (karma), that is, karma of avijñapti.

And in the Abhidharmakośa, the Sautrāntikas say, enumerating reasons for refuting the existence of avijñapti, that (we can do without avijñapti) because avijñapti means only doing nothing (evil or good) in accordance with the vow. (abhyupetyākaraṇamātratvāt. cf. A. K. V. ed by Wogiwara p. 352). This, too, shows the above-mentioned filiation between avijñapti and akṛta.

Now, in the study of karma in the Pāli canon, we find some references to kṛta (kata) and akṛta (kata). There are, as example, such statements as these: “We are born in hell owing to non-doing (akata) of good acts” or “We are born in heaven owing to non-doing of evil acts” (cf. A. N. vol. I. p. 57 etc.). And in the later treatise of the southern Theravādins, such acts as non-killing in terms of the religious observance are classified under the item of kata and akata (cf. ND₁ p. 54; ND₂ p. 126). The idea of this sort concerning akata-kamma in Pāli canon is the same one as akṛta-karma mentioned above.

Consequently, we think the investigation into the characteristic of akṛta-karma in the Āgama was an important factor to produce the idea of avijñapti in the Abhidharma. Akṛta-karma was especially a problem belonging to śīla, so avijñapti was discussed in terms of śīla by the Sarvāstivādins.