

Ngag dbang bkra shis's View of Ordinary Beings' Karma

YANOSHITA Tomoya

1. Introduction

According to the Buddhist theory of karmic fruition, ordinary beings (*so so skye bo, prthagjana*), who have not yet realized the truth and are accumulating karma, transmigrate into a cyclic realm, whereas noble beings (*'phags pa, ārya*), who have realized the truth and are not accumulating karma, do not. In Yanoshita 2023, I have shown that Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa (1357–1419) holds the view that noble beings do not accumulate karma that impels them into a cyclic realm but ordinary beings do.¹⁾ Tsong kha pa's view, however, does not mean that ordinary beings always accumulate karma that impels them into a cyclic realm. What the later dGe lugs pa scholar bSe Ngag dbang bkra shis (1678–1738) says regarding this issue is notable. Ngag dbang bkra shis, in his *rTen 'brel chen mo*, states that a śrāvaka who has not yet reached the path of ārya and is still abiding in the path of equipment (*tshogs lam, saṃbhāramārga*) accumulates virtuous karma, such as giving alms. Nevertheless, this karma does not bring suffering to a śrāvaka and is therefore regarded by Ngag dbang bkra shis as that which does not cause transmigration. According to Ngag dbang bkra shis, this karma never brings about suffering or transmigration, because it is not motivated by the view of individuality (*'jig lta, satkāyadrṣṭi*). In this paper, I will analyze the debate in *rTen 'brel chen mo*, and clarify Ngag dbang bkra shis's understanding of ordinary beings' karma.

2. The understanding of karma and transmigration in Indian Buddhism

Let us first examine the Indian Buddhist understanding of karma and transmigration. Sthiramati (ca. 510–570), in his *Triṃśikābhāṣya* (TrBh), states that the cause of transmigration (*saṃsāra*) is karma and affliction (*kleśa*). Among these, affliction is the primary cause (*pradhāna*). Karma caused by affliction results in rebirth (*punarbhava*,

yang srid). Hence, it is clear that Sthiramati understands *saṃsāra* and *punarbhava* as equivalent.²⁾

Ngag dbang bkra shis holds a different view. As will be shown below, Ngag dbang bkra shis understands that rebirth (*punarbhava*) caused by virtuous karma is not necessarily transmigration.

3. Ngag dbang bkra shis's view of ordinary beings' karma

3.1. Giving alms is that approximate to *samudayasatya*

Ngag dbang bkra shis, in his *rTen 'brel chen mo*, discusses whether every karma accumulated by ordinary beings serves as a cause of transmigration. His opponent advances the view that all karma accumulated by ordinary beings impels them into a cyclic realm because their karma is motivated by ignorance.³⁾ Ngag dbang bkra shis, who does not accept this view, presents the following response:

[Our response]: [That virtuous or nonvirtuous karma accumulated by ordinary beings is karma that impels them into a cyclic realm (*'khor bar 'phen hyed kyi las*)] does not entail [that every karma accumulated by ordinary beings impels them into a cyclic realm]. If you [incorrectly] accept [that the karma accumulated by ordinary beings impels them into a cyclic realm], then the subject—[virtuous] karma of a śrāvaka abiding in the path of equipment (*nyan thos kyi tshogs lam pa*), such as giving alms (*sbyin pa btang ba*), keeping moral conduct (*tshul khrims bsrungs pa*), and cultivating forbearance (*bzod pa bsgoms pa*) —is [karma that impels him into a cyclic realm] because [it (the subject in question) is karma accumulated by an ordinary being] ... You cannot accept the root [consequence that a śrāvaka's karma, such as giving alms, impels him into a cyclic realm], because the śrāvaka's karma leads to the path of liberation (*thal lam*). (*rTen 'brel chen mo* 126b1–3)

Virtuous karma of a śrāvaka abiding in the path of equipment is not the cause of transmigration, because that karma liberates the śrāvaka from suffering. Nevertheless, karma, which causes rebirth in the next existence, approximates to the cause of transmigration. Therefore, based on the statement from the *Viniścayasamgrahaṇī*,⁴⁾ Ngag dbang bkra shis considers this karma as “that approximate to the reality of origin of suffering” (*kun 'byung bden pa rjes mthun pa*).

3.2. What is caused by karma is not necessarily transmigration

Ngag dbang bkra shis discusses whether what is caused by karma is necessarily transmigration. His opponent advances the view that virtuous karma, which is accumulated

by a śrāvaka who realizes the truth of selflessness, is a cause of transmigration (*'khor ba*), because that karma leads the śrāvaka to be reborn in the realm of human beings. Ngag dbang bkra shis, who is against this view, argues that not all karma accumulated by a śrāvaka impels him into a cyclic realm. Virtuous karma accumulated by a śrāvaka, who has not yet realized the truth, motivated by the notion of selflessness, is not the cause of transmigration. Ngag dbang bkra shis, based on the *Lam rim chen mo*, which tells us that one who is reborn as a human being by means of virtuous karma can attain liberation from a cyclic realm, explains that not all those who are reborn as human beings should be regarded as being led to transmigration.⁶⁾ He claims that rebirth in a human being who no longer experiences suffering because of virtuous karma motivated by the understanding of selflessness is not transmigration.

3.3. Virtuous karma is the cause of liberation and omniscience

One who strives for liberation and omniscience must be reborn as a human being and then devote oneself to virtuous karma. Then, he can finally attain liberation and omniscience through the succession of rebirth in a human being. Therefore, virtuous karma can be the cause to obtain liberation and omniscience.⁷⁾ Ngag dbang bkra shis bases this understanding on his reading of the *Lam rim chen mo* and *Tshad ma'i lam khrid* by Dar ma rin chen (1364–1437).⁸⁾

4. Conclusion

The repetition of the process, in which a śrāvaka accumulates virtuous karma not motivated by the view of individuality (*satkāyadrṣṭi*), and comes to birth in the realm of human beings, is not transmigration (*'khor ba*). Here, the important point is whether the rebirth results in suffering. Ngag dbang bkra shis, unlike Sthiramati, does not regard the śrāvaka's rebirth as transmigration (*'khor ba*), because his rebirth does not result in suffering. If the repetition were identical to transmigration, it would follow that the śrāvaka cannot liberate from a cyclic realm, which is absurd. To avoid this irrational consequence, Ngag dbang bkra shis proposes the view mentioned above.

Ngag dbang bkra shis divides karma into two kinds: (1) that which impels one into a cyclic realm (*'khor ba*) and (2) that which leads one to liberation and omniscience. His interpretation provides a clear answer to the soteriological question of how one should practice in order to achieve liberation from suffering.

Notes

- 1) *Lam rim chen mo* 155b3-4 (Cutler 2000, 305).
- 2) TrBh 38.13-16.
- 3) *rTen 'brel chen mo* 126a6-126b1.
- 4) VinSg D 233b6-234a1. Cutler 2000, 305: "By nature, they are not directed toward rebirth in cyclic existence. However, they approximate the physical, mental, and verbal good conduct which leads to rebirth. Consequently, you should understand that on this account they are included under the truth of the origin."
- 5) *Lam rim chen mo* 132b6-133a2. Cutler 2000, 261: "Even persons who strive for liberation must diligently but temporarily seek excellent bodies, etc., in cyclic existence. For, they will ultimately attain certain goodness through a succession of lives in high status."
- 6) *Lam rim chen mo* 132b6-133a2 (Cutler 2000, 261).
- 7) *rTen 'brel chen mo* 128b2-6.
- 8) *Lam rim chen mo* 133a4-5 (Cutler 2000, 262), *Tshad ma'i lam khrid* 3b2.

Abbreviations

TrBh *Triṃśikābhāṣya* (Sthiramati). *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi: deux Traités de Vasubandhu: Viṃśatikā (la Vingtaine) accompagnée d'une Explication en Prose et Triṃśikā (la Trentaine) avec le commentaire de Sthiramati*. Ed. Sylvain Lévi. Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion Press, 1925.

rTen 'brel chen mo *Zab mo rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba'i miha' dpyod legs par bshad pa'i rgya mtsho* (bSe Ngag dbang bkra shis): Ulan Bator edition. *Tshad ma'i lam khrid* (rGyal tshab rje dar ma rin chen): Zhol edition Ca. Tohoku No. 5446. *Lam rim chen mo* *Byang chub lam rim pa chen mo* (Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa): Zhol edition Pa. Tohoku No. 5392. *VinSg* *Viniścayasamgrahanī*. D no. 4038.

Bibliography

Cutler, Joshua, 2000. *The Great Treatise on the Stage of the Path to Enlightenment*. Volume 1. Ithaca: Snow Lion.

Yanoshita, Tomoya. 2023. "Shōja no gō o meguru Tsong kha pa no kenkai" 聖者の業をめぐるツォンカパの見解. *Nihon Chibetto Gakkai kaihō* 日本西蔵学会々報 68 (forthcoming).

(This research was supported in part by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 21J20283)

Key words Ngag dbang bkra shis, *karman*, *so so skye bo*, *'khor ba*

(Graduate Student, Hiroshima University, JSPS Research Fellow)