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A Preliminary Exploration of the Buddhist Doctrine of Karma

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Abstract: Buddhism holds that the universe and living-beings' world originate from the retributive power of wholesome and unwholesome karma generated by all sentient beings, and it rejects the theory of a divine Creator. The concept of karma did not originate from the Buddha exclusively; its ideological precursors can be traced back to the Vedic period of ancient India, gradually gaining philosophical systematization in the Upaniṣads. Drawing on the Karmasiddhiprakaraṇa and early-Buddhist Āgama texts, this paper unpacks the connotation of karma defined as volition-driven actions of body, speech and mind, including volitional karma and karma after volition. Different from non-Buddhist standpoints such as divine determinism, fatalism and acausalism, the Buddhist doctrine of karma is established upon the thought of dependent origination. It emphasizes the decisive role of cetanā (volition), affirms the value of present-life striving, and avoids the trap of fatalism. This paper further investigates the Sarvāstivāda interpretation of karma in Sectarian Buddhism. The Sarvāstivādins put forward the doctrine of manifest karma and unmanifest karma (avijñapti-karman) to explain the persistence of karmic potential between karmic cause and karmic fruit. They also advanced diverse classifications of karma concerning retributive timing and transformability, such as three-period karma, four-kind karma, five-kind karma and eight-kind karma, alongside the distinction between projecting karma and completing karma. Though inheriting pre-Buddhist karma terminology, the Buddha reconstructed karmic theory on the basis of dependent origination and anātman (non-self), taking mental karma as the core. The sectarian debates over karmic momentum laid important theoretical groundwork for the later Sautrāntika seed-theory and the Yogācāra Consciousness-Only school.

Keywords: Karma; Cetanā (Volition); Dependent Origination; Sarvāstivāda; Manifest-Unmanifest Karma; Retributive Fruit; Sectarian Buddhism

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1. Introduction

Buddhism fully affirms that the universe and the world we inhabit are brought into being through the retributive force of wholesome and unwholesome karma (Sanskri: KARMAN) generated from the past up to the present by all sentient beings upon the earth. Buddhism does not advocate that the universe was created by the authority of a deity, a Creator, or a supreme God. Therefore, whether in Early Buddhism, Sectarian (Abhidharma) Buddhism, or later Mahāyāna Buddhism, all traditions consistently reject the notion of a "Creator". What Buddhism affirms is that the origin of our current universe is the cumulative result recalled and manifested by all the wholesome and unwholesome karmic actions and retributions created by sentient beings. All the myriad differences across the universe arise due to karma.

What, then, is karma? Furthermore, was this "doctrine of karma" uniquely invented by the Buddha? Generally speaking,

whether it is the doctrinal theories of non-Buddhist traditions or the Buddhist doctrine of "dependent origination", every theory has its own distinct historical background and developmental source; it is neither fabricated out of thin air nor does it arise without cause. Consequently, the doctrine of "karma" naturally possesses its own historical context.

In the Mahāyāna Karmasiddhiprakaraṇa (《大乘成业论》, Treatise on the Establishment of Karma), composed by Bodhisattva Vasubandhu and translated into Chinese by Master Xuanzang, an exploration of the doctrine of "karma" from the era of Early and Sectarian Buddhism reveals varying accounts regarding its origins and historical evolution. Tracing these accounts through numerous textual sources demonstrates that they had direct or indirect influences from, and close connections to, the intellectual environment of that time. Buddhism, as one of the major currents of Indian thought, emerged around the sixth century BCE. Although the Buddha possessed his own unique insights, one cannot deny that his teachings were inextricably linked to the historical background of his era. Therefore, an in-depth examination of Buddhism alongside the general thought of that period readily reveals common ground shared between Buddhism and contemporary Indian philosophies.

The issue to be discussed here—"karma"—existed well before the time of the Buddha; various religious thinkers and philosophers in India had already established certain theories and arguments regarding the study and explanation of "karma." This paper aims to take the origins of the theory of "karma," the distinctive characteristics of the Buddhist view of karma, and the Sarvāstivāda (说一切有部) interpretation of karma during the Sectarian period as its core themes for a preliminary discussion and exploration.

2. The Meaning of Karma

"Karma" (Sanskrit: karman; Pāli: kamma) carries the meanings of "making/creating," "action," and "volition/will," and even includes labor as a form of kamma. Specifically, it refers to actions of body, speech, and mind. Any movement of our mind, body, or speech that is propelled by the force of cetanā (volition or willpower) constitutes karma. In the scriptural texts, karma is divided into two categories: "volitional karma" (cetanā-karman, 思业) and "karma after volition" (cetayitvā-karman, 思已业). As stated in the Dafanxing Jing (《达梵行经》) of the Madhyama Āgama (《中阿含经》):"How does one know karma? There are said to be two kinds of karma: volitional karma (思业) and karma after volition (思已业). This is called knowing karma." [1] So-called "volitional karma" (cetanā-karman) refers to the activity of thought and will—namely, the various mental activities of discrimination, deliberation, and calculation within the mind, which is precisely "mental karma" (mano-karman, 意业). "Karma after volition" (cetayitvā-karman) refers to expressing one's thoughts and intentions through physical behavior or speech; it is called "that which is done by volition," namely, bodily and vocal karma (身、语二业). Therefore, no behavioral activity arises abruptly out of nowhere; all actions are propelled by cetanā (volition), where the power of volition drives a single moment of thought to create wholesome or unwholesome actions.

From the perspective of Buddhist doctrine, sentient beings bound by afflictions continually transmigrate again and again through the six realms of existence primarily because they deludedly cling to the five aggregates as a real, substantial "Self" and are thus constrained by manifold sufferings. The driving force that governs the transmigration of sentient beings is neither divine power nor an external natural force, but rather the activity of sentient beings' own three modes of action (body, speech, and mind)—"karmic force." Everything that sentient beings possess, whether their internal physical body or external wealth and circumstances, is the result of their own karmic actions. The Abhidharmahṛdaya Śāstra (《阿毗昙心论》) states: "Across the three times and within the five destinies, the various bodily differences and adornments—this adornment of the world is solely karma." [2]

The "three times" refer to the past, present, and future. The "five destinies" are devas (gods), humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell-beings, which together with the physical environment constitute the world inhabited by sentient beings. Thus, the present retributive body received by sentient beings transmigrating through the five destinies is conditioned by karmic force. Even the wealth or poverty experienced in this present life is brought about by the power of conditioned actions.

"Karma" (Sanskrit: karman) refers to the influence of bodily, vocal, and mental actions upon sentient beings. Fascicle 113 of the Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣā Śāstra (《阿毗达磨大毗婆沙论》) states:

"Question: Why is it called karma? Answer: Because of three meanings, it is called karma: first, because of function; second, because of upholding behavioral norms; third, because of differentiating fruits. 'Because of function' means that action itself

explains why it is called karma. ‘Upholding behavioral norms’ means that it is capable of sustaining the disciplinary norms of the seven assemblies. ‘Differentiating fruits’ means that it is capable of distinguishing between desirable and undesirable fruits.” [3]

The function of karma pertains to all sentient beings, meaning that the entire process of the continuity of life is accomplished under the governance of karmic force. With respect to Buddhists specifically, Buddhism has seven assemblies of disciples—bhikṣus (monks), bhikṣuṇīs (nuns), śrāmaṇeras (male novices), śrāmaṇerīs (female novices), śikṣamāṇās (probationary nuns), upāsakas (laymen), and upāsikās (laywomen)—all of whom must act in accordance with ethical discipline to maintain their status. With respect to retribution, karmic force enables sentient beings to obtain desirable (pleasant) or undesirable (unpleasant) fruits in the future.

The formulation of this theory of karma is grounded in the Early Buddhist thought of dependent originatio, and its purpose is to refute the non-Buddhist doctrines of non-causation (ahetu-vāda, 无因论) and monistic causation (eka-hetu-vāda, 一因论). The former completely denies cause and effect, whereas the latter affirms a divine creator as the first cause of all phenomena (dharmas). “Karma” is a latent momentum or efficacy aroused by activity; this momentum does not vanish, but becomes a “vestigial trace in life” or a “reaction of experience” that shapes a person’s character and consequently draws forth future retribution.

3. The Origins of the Doctrine of Karma

It is difficult to trace the absolute earliest origin of the doctrine of karma. However, documented evidence for the concept of karma belongs to the Vedic religious period of India, beginning in textual records with the Four Vedas (《四吠陀》) [4]. The Four Vedas may be regarded as the fountainhead of Indian religion; although expressed through beautiful poetic hymns and sincere emotion, they had not yet developed profound philosophical implications.

For the Āryans since the time of the Ṛgveda (《梨俱吠陀》) [5], human existence did not end with death as its ultimate terminus; they believed that a certain spiritual entity continued to exist. However, in the Vedas, there is virtually no concept of this spiritual entity being reborn back into this world, nor is there a clear account of the subject that exists after death or the retribution drawn forth by good and evil deeds. Nevertheless, in the Atharvaveda (《阿闼婆吠陀》) [6] (6.26.2), it is recorded:

“O Sin! If thou dost not forsake me, then I shall cast thee off at the crossroads; mayst thou follow another person.”

In the same text (6.115.1), it is recorded:

“If I have committed sins while waking or while sleeping, whether already arisen or not yet arisen, may I be absolved from them as if released from being bound to a wooden post.” [7] Here, two conditions for a theory of karma are already present: (1) the residual momentum of a transgression remains in some form; and (2) this latent force tightly binds a person. Based on this evidence, it can be said that the idea of “karma” actually originated in the Atharvaveda. Primarily, the Atharvaveda held that sins committed intentionally or unintentionally necessarily carry corresponding consequences, which led to the creation of incantations (mantras) for the expiation of sin. However, the Atharvaveda represents the beliefs of the lower strata of Indian society, into which many indigenous beliefs were blended. Therefore, whether the root of the karma doctrine originally stemmed from indigenous beliefs remains unknowable.

By the era of the Brāhmaṇas (《梵书》) [8], the concept became much clearer. For instance, the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (《百段梵书》, 10.4.3) states:

“The gods feared death... Whoever wishes to attain immortality must act in accordance with wisdom.” 、

Here, acting with wisdom is viewed as human karma serving as the cause for rebirth and liberation (immortality). The same text (10.4.10) states:

“One who does good shall receive a good birth; one who does evil shall receive an evil birth; through pure deeds one becomes pure, through impure deeds one becomes impure.” [9]

Thus, by this time, there was already a moral consciousness of good and evil, as well as the self-awareness that one reaps the results of one’s own deeds. However, it was during the era of the Upaniṣads (《奥义书》) [10] that karma truly became a philosophical and doctrinal theory. Regarding the reasons for its philosophization, Kimura Taiken (木村泰贤) argues that it

centered on the theory of the "Self" and points out two foundational grounds: (1) an ethical aspect, and (2) a psychological aspect. The ethical ground is based on the moral demand that good causes yield good results and evil causes yield evil results. The second, psychological ground is that although sentient beings are constituted by physiological and psychological structures, there are innate differences in talent and temperament among individuals, which can only be explained by differences in experiences from past lives. [11]

The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (《布利哈德奥义书》, 4.4.2–5) states:

"According as a person acts and conducts himself, so does he attain various states; thus, in accordance with his speech and actions, he obtains his next birth. Truly, one of good karma becomes good, and one of evil karma becomes evil; one becomes pure by pure deeds, and dark by dark deeds. Therefore it is said: a person is formed of desire; as is his desire, so is his resolve; as is his resolve, so is the deed (karman) he performs; and whatever deed he performs, that fruit does he attain."

Therefore, "karma" is precisely the ethically significant good or evil speech and action performed by the Self. Regardless of whether its quality is good or evil, "desire" gives rise to "will/resolve," "will" produces "karma," and "karma" yields the "fruit." This constitutes the theory of "karma" in the Upaniṣads. Consequently, during this period, "karma" already carried profound significance and was viewed as the driving force behind the transmigration of sentient beings through birth and death (saṃsāra).

During the era when the Buddha appeared in the world, India was a society where numerous religious doctrines coexisted. On one hand, there was the traditional Brahmanical thought of the "identity of Brahman and Ātman" (梵我同一 / 梵我一如) [12]; on the other hand, there were the newly emerging śramaṇa (ascetic) movements dissatisfied with traditional Brahmanism, represented by the "Six Non-Buddhist Teachers" (六师外道) [13]. Although the existence of karma was already a general consensus at the time, there were still various heterodox theories, including beliefs that denied karmic retribution altogether. For instance, traditional Brahmanism held that everything in the human world stems from divine will and fundamentally denied human free will. Among the Six Non-Buddhist Teachers:

1. Pūrṇa Kāśyapa (Pāli: Purāṇa Kassapa, 富兰那迦叶) was an acausalist who denied any distinction between good and evil, holding that the defilement of birth-and-death and the purity of liberation are not products of human volition, but are purely accidental; he may also be called a fortuitist (偶然论者).

2. Maskarin Gośālīputra (Pāli: Makkhali Gosāla, 末伽梨拘舍梨) was a determinist/fatalist who believed that transmigration follows a fixed number of eons (kalpas) and that human beings have not the slightest power to bring about their own liberation; this school became known as the Ājīvika sect (邪命派).

3. Ajita Keśakambalin (Pāli: Ajita Kesakambala, 阿耆多翅舍钦婆罗) was a thoroughgoing materialist and hedonist who denied the causal efficacy of good and evil deeds; he was a forerunner of the Lokāyata (Cārvāka) school, known as the Materialist school (顺世派).

4. Kakuda Kātyāyana (Pāli: Pakudha Kaccāyana, 迦罗鸠驮迦旃延) advocated the permanence of fundamental elements; he was also a materialist and an acausalist sensualist who denied moral action, holding that earth, water, fire, wind, space, pleasure/pain, and the soul are independent, immutable elements. Thus, these first four thinkers all essentially denied karmic retribution for good and evil deeds.

5. Nirgrantha Jñātiputra (Pāli: Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, 干陀若提子 / 尼乾陀若提子), the founder of Jainism (Mahāvīra), regarded "karma" as a material factor preventing the liberation of the Self, and therefore advocated strict asceticism to eradicate past karma and prevent the arising of new karma.

6. Sañjayin Vairāṭīputra (Pāli: Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta, 散若夷毗罗梨弗) was an agnostic skeptic who neither affirmed nor denied wholesome karma, refusing to give definitive answers to any question; he may also be described as a sophist.

These various competing doctrines ultimately boil down to three major positions: Divine Determinism / Theism (神意论), Fatalism / Past-Karma Determinism (宿命论), and Acausalism / Accidentalism (无因论).

4. Characteristics of the Buddhist Doctrine of Karma

Among the three views mentioned above, "Divine Determinism" asserts that all pleasure and pain we experience depend upon the will of an omniscient and omnipotent deity, while "Acausalism" denies the retributive fruits of good and evil actions.

It is easy to understand why neither of these two views was accepted by the World-Honored One (the Buddha). However, "Fatalism" asserts that all pleasant and painful encounters in the present life are entirely determined by karma created in past lives. On the surface, this appears almost identical to the Buddhist theory of karma—does this not lay the Buddhist doctrine of "karma" open to the suspicion of fatalism?

Of course, this is not the case. According to the Book of the Threes (Tika-nipāta) of the Aṅguttara Nikāya (《增支部 · 三集》), the Buddha criticized the fatalists as follows:

"If that is indeed so, Venerables, then due to causes made in a past life, one becomes a killer of living beings; due to causes made in a past life, one takes what is not given; due to causes made in a past life, one engages in sexual misconduct; due to causes made in a past life, one speaks falsehood; due to causes made in a past life, one speaks divisively; due to causes made in a past life, one speaks harshly; due to causes made in a past life, one speaks frivolously; due to causes made in a past life, one becomes covetous; due to causes made in a past life, one becomes malicious; due to causes made in a past life, one holds wrong views. Monks! For those who fall back on what was done in a past life as the essential reality, there is neither desire nor effort regarding what ought to be done or what ought not to be done." [14]

Therefore, because fatalists overemphasize the determinism of past karma, they completely obliterate the value of actions in the present life. On this point, there is a vast difference from the Buddhist teaching. Buddhism places great importance on the value of action and exertion in the present life. If everything in present reality were attributed entirely to determination by past lives, wouldn't any effort toward the good right now be a complete waste of energy? Who would then incline toward the cultivation of higher wholesome practices?

Consequently, for a living being in the present life, whether experiencing pain or pleasure—although influenced to some degree by past karmic forces—present behavioral activities can improve the pain and pleasure of both the present and future lives. This is analogous to an infant born with a congenital disorder: if given proper care and medical treatment now, the child can grow up to be healthy and lively. Conversely, an infant born completely healthy and vigorous may, due to neglect and lack of proper care, unfortunately die within a few months or a few years. Could one possibly claim that this too was entirely predetermined by the past?

Furthermore, regarding pleasure and pain, the Buddha explained them through "dependent origination" (pratītyasamutpāda, 缘 起) [15]. First, he rejected the extremes that pleasure and pain are self-caused, other-caused, both, or neither, explaining them instead through the Middle Way of dependent origination. For instance, in his discourse with non-Buddhists, Venerable Bhūmija (浮弥尊者), after refuting self-causation, other-causation, and so forth, records the Buddha's words:

"The World-Honored One says that pleasure and pain arise from dependent origination. Venerable Bhūmija! As for those śramaṇas and brāhmaṇas who claim that pleasure and pain are self-made, that too arises from conditions; to say that it does not arise from dependent origination is impossible. As for those who claim that pleasure and pain are made by another, made by both self and other, or made without cause by neither self nor other, that too arises from dependent origination; to say that it does not arise from conditions is impossible. Venerable Bhūmija! As for those śramaṇas and brāhmaṇas who claim that pleasure and pain are self-made, that too arises conditioned by contact; to say that it does not arise from contact is impossible. As for those who claim that pleasure and pain are made by another, made by both self and other, or made without cause by neither self nor other, that too arises conditioned by contact; to say that it does not arise conditioned by contact is impossible." [16]

So-called "arising from dependent origination" means that a combination of various causes and conditions is required for a certain state to arise. Thus, the conditions causing suffering can be manifold. For example, in the Vedanā-saṃyutta (< 受相应 >) of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (《相应部》), it is stated that the arising of the three feelings (painful, pleasant, and neutral) is not solely due to the maturation of karma, but also includes conditions such as wind, bile, phlegm, or changes in climate. [17]

Nevertheless, the most crucial primary factor is cetanā (volition), which is precisely "karma." Within the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, "birth" and "aging-and-death", accompanied by sorrow, lamentation, pain, and distress, represent suffering human existence. Tracing the causes of this suffering inward eventually leads to "ignorance" (无明), which exists in the human mind in the form of deluded conceptions. Driven by internal "ignorance" manifesting outwardly as the grasping of "craving" (渴爱), all these varied operations can be collectively termed "volitional formations" (行). Fascicle 12 of the

Saṃyukta Āgama (《杂阿含经》) states:

"What are volitional formations? There are three kinds of formations—bodily formations, vocal formations, and mental formations." [18]

These are precisely the activities of body, speech, and mind centered on "volition" (cetanā). As stated in the Book of the Sixes (Chakka-nipāta) of the Aṅguttara Nikāya (《增支部 · 六集》):

"Monks! I declare that volition (cetanā) is karma; having willed, one creates karma through body, speech, and mind." [19]

Therefore, saṃskāra (formations) belongs to the aspect of volitional activity, whose essence is karmic force. Probing a layer deeper, "karma" is determined by "ignorance".

Reflecting on human existence, it relies primarily on past afflictions and karma—such as craving and clinging—conditioning one another in turn, all of which have been rooted since beginningless time in the great dark delusion of ignorance. Consequently, ordinary worldlings, taking ignorance and craving as the content of their minds, engage outwardly in all sorts of activities; this constitutes the behavioral life of ordinary beings. Thus, the various distinctive characteristics possessed by human beings take concrete form primarily centered around these life behaviors (karma). As stated in the Cūḷakammavibhaṅga Sutta (《小业分别经》) of the Majjhima Nikāya (《中部》):

"Sentient beings are owners of their karma, heirs of their karma; they have karma as their womb, are bound to their karma, and have karma as their refuge. It is karma that differentiates sentient beings into states of superiority and inferiority." [20]

Furthermore, these behavioral actions in life in turn augment the contents of the mind, causing the mental formations of sentient beings to continue uninterruptedly. As long as our minds continue to take ignorance and craving as their content, we cannot escape the experience of birth, aging, and death—namely, suffering. Therefore, it can truly be said that the significance of the "doctrine of karma" lies at the very heart of the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination. As Fascicle 12 of the Saṃyukta Āgama (《杂阿含经》) states:

"That is to say: when this exists, that exists; when this arises, that arises. Conditioned by ignorance are volitional formations... and thus arises this entire mass of great suffering. When ignorance ceases, volitional formations cease... and thus ceases this entire mass of great suffering." [21]

5. A Brief Account of the Sarvāstivāda View on the Doctrine of Karma

Although "karma" (Sanskrit: karman) passes away immediately after it is enacted, its efficacy to draw forth future consequences remains. Thus, the "existence of karmic force" is aroused by bodily, vocal, and mental actions, functioning as the potential (dynamic existence) to generate fruits in a subsequent period. Why does karma created in the present draw forth retribution in the future? What exactly does this enduring, unlost karmic force refer to, and how does it exist? During the Buddha's lifetime, this technical question was not elaborated upon in detail. Consequently, by the later period of Sectarian Buddhism, each school put forward its own arguments, giving rise to a wide variety of philosophical theories and explanations. Below is an account focusing on the doctrine of the Sarvāstivāda (说一切有部) school.

In the treatises on karma within the Mahāvibhāṣā Śāstra (《大毘婆沙论》), one finds numerous features characteristic of Sectarian Buddhist karma theory. The Sarvāstivāda school divides karma into "volitional karma" (cetanā-karman, 思业) and "karma after volition" (cetayitvā-karman, 思已业). Volitional karma is mental karma, while karma after volition comprises bodily and vocal karma. Bodily and vocal karma are each further subdivided into two types: manifest karma (vijñapti-karman, 表业) and unmanifest karma (avijñapti-karman, 无表业).

The Sarvāstivādins assert that both manifest and unmanifest karma exist as real, substantial entities:

- The substantial essence of bodily manifest karma is shape-form (形色).
- The substantial essence of vocal manifest karma is vocal sound (声语).
- The substantial essence of unmanifest karma is invisible, non-resistant matter/form (不可见的无对色).

By contrast, the Dārstāntikas (譬 喻 者) hold that manifest and unmanifest karma lack substantial reality; similarly, the Sautrāntikas (经量部) and the Yogācāra (瑜伽行派) school maintain that manifest and unmanifest karma are provisional designations rather than real entities. The concept of "unmanifest karma"was an original innovation of the Sarvāstivāda school designed to explain the problem of how karmic force persists between the enactment of a karmic cause and the

maturation of its karmic fruit. Although establishing avijñapti as "matter included in the sphere of mental objects" (法处所摄色) faced theoretical challenges and criticisms, the doctrine of avijñapti exerted a profound influence on the later Sautrāntika theory of seeds (种子说) and even on Tathāgatagarbha (如来藏) thought.

Among the three karmas of body, speech, and mind, the Sarvāstivādins divide only bodily and vocal karma into manifest and unmanifest karma; mental karma does not include unmanifest karma, and thus mental karma has no distinction between manifest and unmanifest. So-called "manifest karma" occurs when mental karma impels physical or verbal action, which is called bodily or vocal manifest karma. Afterward, although the outward physical or verbal action ceases, the cause capable of drawing forth a future fruit remains within one's body and mind, continuing in a serial stream to attract future retribution; this is bodily and vocal "unmanifest karma".

Regarding their substantial essences: the essence of mental karma is the mental factor of volition (思 心 所), whereas regarding the essences of bodily and vocal manifest karma, Fascicle 13 of the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya (《俱舍论》) states: "Bodily manifest karma takes shape-form as its essence; the essence of vocal manifest karma is precisely articulated sound." [22]

The Sarvāstivādins divide the visual object-field (the objective sphere corresponding to the eye faculty) into two aspects: color-form (显色) and shape-form (形色). Here, they take shape-form as the substantial essence of bodily manifest karma, and the objective sphere of the ear faculty (sound) as the substantial essence of vocal manifest karma. Thus, it can be said that their conception of bodily and vocal manifest karma is external, material, and formal. Consequently, since it is a material existence, it possesses no enduring volitional function of its own, and its behavioral enactment vanishes in the very moment it occurs; it is not something that persists indefinitely. Therefore, in order to allow external material dharmas (bodily and vocal manifest karma) to leave an enduring imprint within the psycho-physical continuum that determines future behaviors and retributions, the Sarvāstivādins had no choice but to posit a separate category—"unmanifest karma"—to account for the continuation of karmic momentum.

Regarding the substantial nature of "unmanifest karma," the Sarvāstivādins hold that it is derived matter created by the four great elements—a real, substantial dharma. The Sautrāntikas, conversely, hold that it is merely the "seeds" of the mental factor of volition (cetanā), belonging to provisional dharmas. This was a major point of debate between the two schools: the Sarvāstivādins put forward eight scriptural proofs to establish avijñapti-rūpa as a real entity, which the Sautrāntikas systematically refuted—a debate clearly documented in the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya. [23]

Although movements of body and speech arise due to cetanā (volition), once they are concretely expressed in outward behavior, bodily and vocal manifest karma are no longer mental phenomena, but rather material dharmas. Consequently, a philosophical problem arises: how can such material phenomena possess the moral qualities of being wholesome (善) or unwholesome (不善)? Fascicle 2 of the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya (《俱舍论》) explains:

"Among the ten resistant material elements mentioned here, apart from visible form and sound, the remaining eight are morally indeterminate (无 记)—namely, the five material sense faculties and the object-fields of odor, taste, and tangible object—because they cannot be designated as wholesome or unwholesome in nature, hence they are called indeterminate. Some say they are called indeterminate because they cannot project a karmically 成 熟 retributive fruit; if that were so, unconditioned/pure dharmas would also have to be solely indeterminate. The remaining ten spheres span all three moral qualities (wholesome, unwholesome, and indeterminate): the seven mental spheres are called wholesome when associated with non-greed, etc., unwholesome when associated with greed, etc., and indeterminate in other cases. The sphere of mental objects is called wholesome if it is of the nature of non-greed, etc., or associated with them, or causally aroused (等起) by them, or analytical cessation; it is called unwholesome if it is of the nature of greed, etc., associated with them, or causally aroused by them; the rest are called indeterminate. The spheres of visible form and sound are wholesome or unwholesome when included within bodily and vocal manifest karma causally aroused by wholesome or unwholesome mental force; the rest are indeterminate." [24]

Furthermore, since unmanifest form is a material dharma included within the sphere of mental objects, unmanifest form naturally spans both wholesome and unwholesome qualities as well. To resolve the question of how material dharmas can possess wholesome or unwholesome moral qualities, the Sarvāstivādins introduced the doctrine of causal arousal / origination

(等起). Fascicle 13 of the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya states:

"Wholesomeness by causal arousal refers to bodily and vocal karma and mental formations dissociated from mind, because they are causally aroused by wholesomeness by intrinsic nature and wholesomeness by association." [25]

That is to say, it is solely through "causal arousal" that such dharmas acquire wholesome or unwholesome qualities. The reason bodily and vocal karma become wholesome or unwholesome through "causal arousal" is primarily that the mind/volition that initiates the karma is wholesome or unwholesome; therefore, the bodily and vocal karma generated from it ultimately partake of that wholesome or unwholesome nature. In short, the mind can causally arouse mental karma or all forms of karma, while "mental karma" causally arouses bodily and vocal karma. As Fascicle 13 of the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya states:

"However, the mental factor of volition is itself mental karma, whereas the karma enacted by volition is divided into bodily and vocal karma, because they are causally aroused by volition." [26]

By viewing the substantial essence of outward and latent "karma" as material dharmas, the Sarvāstivādins determined that the power of "unmanifest karma" can endure until future retribution is realized, and then used the concept of "causal arousal" to derive its wholesome or unwholesome moral valuation—a doctrinal system uniquely innovated by the Sarvāstivāda school.

According to the Mahāvibhāṣā Śāstra, after a sentient being creates karmic force, it necessarily draws forth retribution; there is an inevitable correlation between karma and its fruit. What, then, is the meaning of the convertibility (可转变) versus non-convertibility (不可转变) of karma discussed here? Can all karma be transformed or altered?

Here, we first discuss karma on two distinct levels:

1. The determination of the wholesome or unwholesome act itself: For example, if a person commits the unwholesome karma of theft, once this behavior is manifested outwardly and becomes an established fact, there is no room to alter the fact that the act occurred.

2. The residual momentum of karma: During the interim period after the karmic cause has been enacted but before it has drawn forth its karmic fruit, there remains an opportunity for transformation. That is, although the past karmic cause has already been created and accumulated, as long as it has not yet actualized its corresponding retribution, at present there is only the karmic cause while the karmic fruit remains undetermined. In other words, before the causal relationship is fully consummated, karma during this interim period can be transformed.

If karmic retribution can be transformed, under what circumstances can karmic force undergo transformation? And what is the timeframe for receiving retribution—that is, is there a temporal sequence between the karmic cause and the karmic fruit? Among the Abhidharma treatise masters, there are generally five different classifications regarding the timing and determinacy of karmic retribution:

(1) Three-Period Karma (三时业)

The classification of Three-Period Karma is upheld by the treatise masters of the Abhidharma, referring to three types:

1. Karma to be experienced in the present life (顺现法受业): If karma is created and augmented in this present life, one experiences its matured fruit within this very life. All wholesome and unwholesome karma must wait within a single continuum, a specific life-stage, or a single shared species-destiny (众同分) before its matured fruit is experienced; only thus is it called karma experienced in the present life. Therefore, it is impossible to create karma in one instant and immediately receive its matured fruit in that exact same instant or the very next instant. Although karma experienced in the present life is personally triggered in this life, it must still await heterogeneous maturation (异类而熟).

2. Karma to be experienced in the next rebirth (顺次生受业): If karma is created and augmented in this life and its matured fruit is experienced in the second (immediately following) life—that is, creating karma in this life and receiving its retribution in the very next life—it is called karma to be experienced in the next rebirth.

3. Karma to be experienced in subsequent lives (顺后次受业): If karma is created and augmented in this life and its matured fruit is experienced in the third life, the fourth life, or any life thereafter. In other words, receiving the fruit only after the third or fourth rebirth following this life is called karma to be experienced in subsequent lives. [27]

The Sarvāstivāda school regards these Three-Period Karmas as fixed karma (定业) that cannot be transformed or averted;

one will inevitably experience their retribution, with the only difference being whether the timing is sooner or later. Although the Three-Period Karmas established in Buddhism are all termed fixed karma, the Abhidharma masters further distinguish a category of unfixed/indeterminate karma (不 定 业) outside of fixed karma. Moreover, even when the time period of retribution is fixed (as in the three periods), the specific type of maturation may not yet be fixed, giving rise to classifications of four, five, or eight kinds of karma.

(2) Indeterminate Karma (不定业 — The Dārstāntika / Sautrāntika View)

According to the Dārstāntikas (譬喻者):

"Because all karma can be transformed, even karma of immediate retribution (无间业) can be made to turn/transform." [28]

Regarding the creation and augmentation of karma during a person's lifetime, one does not necessarily have to experience one's own matured karma in a rigidly fixed manner. Thus, for the Sautrāntikas (经 部), the "transformation" (zhuan, 转) of karma is not restricted merely to indeterminate karma; even the Three-Period Karmas (such as karma to be experienced in the present life), all karma, and even the five heinous crimes of immediate retribution can be transformed. Karma to be experienced in the present life is considered "indeterminate" in the sense that it does not necessarily have to yield a rigid matured fruit in the present state. Regarding the statement in the treatise, "If one experiences it, it is fixed in the present dharma and not elsewhere (非余)," "not elsewhere" here means that it does not carry over to a non-human realm after death. From the perspective that karmic force can be transformed, the Sautrāntika view of karma is deeply humanistic, offering human beings renewed hope and the motivation for diligent effort, holding that all karma in the human realm is transformable.

(3) Four Kinds of Karma (四业)

1. Karma to be experienced in the present life (dṛṣṭadharma-vedanīya) 顺现法受业
2. Karma to be experienced in the next rebirth (upapadya-vedanīya) 顺次生受业
3. Karma to be experienced in subsequent lives (aparaparyāya-vedanīya) 顺后次受业
4. Karma of indeterminate time of experience (aniyata-vedanīya) 顺不定受业

Here, the first three items constitute the Three-Period Karmas, which cannot be transformed. The fourth, karma of indeterminate experience, allows an individual to transform karmic force by upholding moral precepts and diligently cultivating pure conduct; thus, this indeterminate karma is convertible.

(4) Five Kinds of Karma (五业)

1. Karma to be experienced in the present life 顺现法受业
2. Karma to be experienced in the next rebirth 顺次生受业
3. Karma to be experienced in subsequent lives 顺后次受业
4. Karma of indeterminate time whose maturation is fixed 顺不定受业异熟决定
5. Karma of indeterminate time whose maturation is unfixed 顺不定受业异熟不决定

The first three (Three-Period Karmas) as well as indeterminate-time karma whose maturation is fixed are all non-convertible. Only the last category—karma of indeterminate time whose maturation is unfixed—can be transformed.

(5) Eight Kinds of Karma (八业)

1. Present-life karma with fixed maturation (顺现法受业异熟决定)
2. Present-life karma with unfixed maturation(顺现法受业异熟不决定)
3. Next-life karma with fixed maturation (顺次生受业异熟决定)
4. Next-life karma with unfixed maturation (顺次生受业异熟不决定)
5. Subsequent-life karma with fixed maturation (顺后次受业异熟决定)
6. Subsequent-life karma with unfixed maturation (顺后次受业异熟不决定)
7. Indeterminate-time karma with fixed maturation (顺不定受业异熟决定)
8. Indeterminate-time karma with unfixed maturation (顺不定受业异熟不决定)[29]

From the standpoint of karmic cause and karmic fruit, Buddhism originally established its view of karmic causality to counter non-Buddhist theories of automatic rebirth in heaven through ritual sacrifice. When we create various kinds of karma, what ultimately determines which realm of existence we are reborn into is spoken of in terms of the overall function of karma.

Specifically, karma itself is divided into projecting karma (引业) and completing/fulfilling karma (满业):

● Projecting karma draws forth the shared generic status (众同分), determining the realm of rebirth as well as the shared physical environment (such as mountains, rivers, and the great earth).

● Completing karma accounts for the specific personal retributions within that realm, such as individual differences in beauty or ugliness, height, weight, and intelligence or dullness.

Thus, the Mahāvibhāṣā Śāstra cites the Prajñapti Śāstra (《施设论》) on the establishment of karma to explain that "a single moment (kṣaṇa) of karma can project only a single shared life-continuum" [30]; the Sarvāstivāda school maintains the position that one projecting karma draws forth one lifetime of generic retribution (一业引一生).

Neither bodily karma nor vocal karma is a purely independent objective phenomenon; the essence of karma takes cetanā (volition) as its primary driving force. Because a single moment of decisive volition constitutes one projecting karma, it is said that one karma projects one lifetime. For the Sarvāstivādins, a karmic fruit does not occur simultaneously with the arising of the karma; when present karma arises, it must wait until a future moment or lifetime for its retributive fruit to be experienced. Regarding this doctrine that "one karma projects one lifetime," the fundamental essence of karma returns once again to the concept of volition.

Early Buddhism generally explained karma through the moral principle of "wholesome causes yield wholesome fruits, and unwholesome causes yield unwholesome fruits." By the era of Sectarian Buddhism, the concept of heterogeneous maturation (异 熟)—maturing across different moral categories (from wholesome/unwholesome cause to morally indeterminate fruit) and across different times (异 类 而 熟、异 时 因 果)—was used to explain karmic causality. Moreover, apart from being influenced by the residual momentum of past karma, maturation also involves the power of habituation/perfuming (熏习). Human behavior shapes our character and patterns of thought: habituating wholesome karma cultivates wholesome strength, while habituating unwholesome actions naturally manifests as unwholesome behavior. From the Sectarian explanation of vipāka, it not only accounts for the residual momentum generated by previously enacted karma, but even more importantly emphasizes the power of habituation in the present life—affirming that the wholesome or unwholesome direction of our karma can be determined by ourselves right now.

6. Conclusion

In summary, tracing the origins of the doctrine of karma in India reveals that precursors to the concept of "karma" can be found as early as the Atharvaveda, and by the time of the Upaniṣads, its philosophical framework had been largely completed. Although the Buddha inherited the terminology of this concept, his manner of understanding and interpreting it differed fundamentally from traditional theories of karma. Pre-Buddhist doctrines of "karma" were invariably bound up with the notion of a permanent "Self"—either viewing karma as "self-made" manifested by the metaphysical Self, or viewing karma as "other-made" by an external agent apart from the empirical self—both of which concealed an underlying attachment to "Self" (ātman). The Buddha, by contrast, recognized that all phenomena arise through dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda, 缘 起). Because all things arise from causes and conditions—that is, are dependently originated dharmas—they are all impermanent, conditioned, fraught with suffering, and devoid of an independent Self. In this light, "karma" is simply the primary causal condition through which body, mind, and the experienced world are established.

Because of this, the Buddha was recognized both as an advocate of moral action (业论者) and as an advocate of energetic effort (精进论者). The reason the Buddha is regarded as an advocate of effort is that he held human behavioral exertion in the present life to be genuinely meaningful; so long as human beings strive for the elevation and purification of their lives, such effort is of absolute value. The fundamental reason for this lies in the Buddha's identification of the essence of karma with volition (cetanā, 思). Because the function of volition/will inherently possesses the capacity to make free choices with respect to its cognitive objects, once one recognizes that the essence of karma is volition, one must necessarily affirm the freedom of the will.

Consequently, among the three karmas of body, speech, and mind, the most crucial is mental karma (意业). As recorded in the Upāli Sutta (< 优婆离经 >, Fascicle 32 of the Madhyama Āgama), when the Jain ascetic Dīghanakha / Upāli asked the Buddha:

"'Gautama, since these three karmas are thus distinguished, which karma do you designate as the heaviest?' ... The World-Honored One replied: 'Tapasvin (Ascetic), among these three karmas thus distinguished, I designate mental karma as the heaviest.'" [31]

However, this does not mean that bodily and vocal karma are trivial compared to mental karma. Because bodily and vocal karma are "karma after volition"—actions enacted only after volition has already occurred—whenever bodily and vocal karma manifest in their complete form, the operation of mental karma necessarily lies at their very foundation.

Although the various schools of Sectarian Buddhism differed in their philosophical nuances, modes of expression, and technical terminology, their fundamental stances regarding the "residual habitual momentum of karma" (业的余习势力) were essentially aligned. Furthermore, examining how the various schools explained the enduring existence of karmic force makes it easy to observe how the Buddhist doctrine of karma evolved and extended toward the theory of seeds (种子说)—most notably the Sautrāntika concept of "volitional seeds" (思种子), which exerted an exceptionally profound influence on the Vijñaptimātratā (Consciousness-Only / 唯识) system of the later Yogācāra school.

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