The Creation of Karma among Arhats: An Examination of Doctrine in Sarvāstivāda and Theravāda

SHIMIZU Toshifumi

0. People create karma, that causes them to be reborn in their next lives. This poses a question: Do Arhats, who have freed themselves from the chains of transmigration, create karma? As Arhats have abandoned all defilements, they do not generate unskillful thought (akuśala-citta) and thus, in turn, do not create bad karma (pāpa-karma) through evil deeds such as murder or stealing. However, do they generate skillful thought (kuśala-citta) and create meritorious karma (puṇya-karma) through virtuous deeds that are unconnected with cultivation, such as saving people or contributing to society? If Arhats also create meritorious karma, would it not lead to a contradiction where Arhats who are no longer supposed to be subject to the process of transmigration are reborn in the realm of devas? Or are Arhats, who have gained enlightenment, have no interest in secular acts and feel nothing even when witnessing a person who is drowning in a pond?

The question as to whether even Arhats, who have freed themselves from the chains of transmigration, create new meritorious karma manifests in a range of materials in both Sarvāstivāda and Theravāda. The following displays the completely different insights between the two sects.

Sarvāstivāda: Arhats create meritorious karma (puṇya-karma).
Theravāda: Arhats do not create meritorious karma (puñña-kamma).

Among these, the interpretation in Theravāda has largely already been examined in previous research. The interpretation in Theravāda is that Arhats do not create meritorious karma. However, this does not mean that Arhats do not engage in any acts that are deemed “good” in secular terms. In Theravāda, there exists a unique morally non-defined mind called functional thought (kiriyā-citta) that occurs only in Arhats, and it is through this mind that they are thought to accomplish acts that are deemed “good” in secular terms. As this mind is morally non-defined, it does not lead to existence in a next life.

On the other hand, while the interpretation in Sarvāstivāda is that Arhats create meritori-
ous karma, no details are given as to the nature of this. In Sarvāstivāda, bodily karma is interpreted as "the form of the body," vocal karma as "the voice itself," and mental karma as volition (cetanā). Among these, bodily karma and vocal karma are generated by the mind (citta). Moreover, the moral state of mental karma (i.e., volition) is always in accordance with that of the mind (citta). Therefore, there is a need to consider the moral state of mind (citta) generated by Arhats. In addition, meritorious karma-s, such as saving people and contributing to society, that are not directly related to cultivation are generated through skillful thought with outflow (sāsrava kuśala-citta). According to the Abhidharmakośa-Bhāṣya (Pradhan, ed. 1967, AKBh.), Arhats also generate skillful thought with outflow and perform secular acts such as Stūpa worship. Thus, there is recognition in Sarvāstivāda that Arhats generate skillful thought with outflow and create meritorious karma. However, we are then presented with the following two problems:

1. As Arhats have abandoned all dharmas with outflow, they have of course also abandoned skillful thought with outflow. Therefore, if we take the position that they do indeed generate skillful thought with outflow, is this not in contradiction with the doctrine?

2. Skillful karma with outflow (sāsrava kuśala-karman) is seen as a cause of transmigration. If Arhats generate skillful thought and thus create skillful karma with outflow, would that not result in a contradiction where Arhats who are not supposed to transmigrate, actually create a cause for transmigration?

In this paper, I will examine how Sarvāstivāda solves these two problems.

1. I will begin by examining the first problem. According to the Sarvāstivāda definition of "Arhats having abandoned all dharmas with outflow," Arhats have also abandoned skillful thought with outflow. However, this does not mean that "Arhats do not generate skillful thought with outflow." Even if Arhats have abandoned skillful thought with outflow, they continue to possess it. To explain this in a logical manner, Sarvāstivāda asserts that there are two types of abandonment (prahāṇa). One is svabhāva-prahāṇa, while the other is ālambana-prahāṇa.

If defiled dharma (= various entities that are opposed to enlightenment) is abandoned by insight or repeated cultivation, then possession (samanvāgama) of this defiled dharma is lost (tyakta/tyāga) at the same time. In other words, this defiled dharma is relinquished and cannot become active again. This way of abandonment is called svabhāva-prahāṇa.
In contrast, even if undefiled dharma (= various entities that are not opposed to enlightenment) is abandoned by insight or repeated cultivation, possession of this undefiled dharma continues. This way of abandonment is called the abandonment of ālambana-prahāṇa. That is to say, possession of skillful thought with outflow continues even after abandonment, and in some cases, becomes active once more.

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<th>Applicable way of Abandonment</th>
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<td>Defiled Dharma</td>
<td>svabhāva-prahāṇa</td>
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Envisaging these two types of abandonment has allowed both ideas, “Arhats having abandoned all skillful thought with outflow” and “even Arhats generate skillful thought with outflow” to coexist without any contradictions.

2. The previous section provided an outline of the doctrine and indicated that in Sarvāstivāda, the notion of “Arhats generating skillful thought with outflow” is accepted on a doctrinal level. However, in this case, a contradiction arises in which “Arhats create causes of transmigration.”

Sarvāstivāda solves any contradictions related to this by asserting that “even if Arhats create karma, this karma does not have the power to create next lives but is expended in this life if they receive retribution fruit or can extinguish this retribution fruit.” Therefore, this interpretation states that even if Arhats create meritorious karma, this karma does not have the power to create next lives.

3. Above, I examined the understanding of Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda with respect to the creation of karma among Arhats. Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda have differing interpretations as to whether Arhats, who are no longer supposed to be subject to the process of transmigration, can create further meritorious karma.

The interpretation of Theravāda is that Arhats do not create meritorious karma (puñña-kamma). However, this does not mean that Arhats do not engage in any acts that are deemed “good” in secular terms that are unconnected with cultivation. Rather than skillful thought (kusala-citta), Theravāda interprets these cases as the generation of a unique morally non-defined mind called functional thought (kiriyā-citta) that occurs only in Arhats, and this brings about the materialization of secular acts.

The interpretation of Sarvāstivāda is that Arhats can also create meritorious karma (pu-
ña-karman). In other words, Arhats also generate skillful thought with outflow in cases where they perform acts that are deemed “good” in secular terms and are unconnected with cultivation. However, under this interpretation, the meritorious karma of Arhats is expended if they receive retribution fruit within their last life, and it does not have the power to lead to next lives.

We see signs of these interpretations in the Dhammasaṅganī in the case of Theravāda and in the Vijñānakāya in the case of Sarvāstivāda. While at first glance these teachings on Abhidharma seem little more than dull and uninteresting collections of definitions, when we re-read them in light of specific problems such as these, we then see that the doctrine has rigorous definitions that allow us to answer questions of this kind.

1) According to the Theravāda definition, meritorious karma (puñña-kamma) is skillful karma (kusala-kamma) in the three spheres (kāma-dhātu, rūpa-dhātu and arūpa-dhātu), whereas according to the Sarvāstivāda definition, it is skillful karma (kuśala-karman) in the sense sphere (kāma-dhātu). Cf. Vibhaṅga (p. 135.17–25), AKBh. (p. 227.14).
2) Cf. Samayabhedaśāvāca (P: u 174a1, D: su 144b7), Kathāvatthu 17, 1 (p. 543.15–27).
4) In Theravāda, the essence of bodily karma, vocal karma, and mental karma is in all cases understood to be volition (cetana). In the Kathavatthu-Āṭṭhakathā 17, 1 (p. 164.11–14), while Arhats perform giving and Śūpā worship, these are understood as being performed not through skillful thought but through functional thought.
5) Sarvāstivāda separates skillful karma (kuśala-karman) into the two categories of with outflow (sāsraya) and without outflow (anāsraya). Of these, it is skillful karma with outflow that has the power to generate retribution fruit (vipāka-phala). Within this skillful karma with outflow, it is meritorious karma that relates to the sense sphere. Cf. AKBh. (pp. 255.25–256.2).
6) Cf. AKBh. (pp. 268.19–269.4).
7) There are two types of defiled dharma (kliṣṭa-dharma): akuśala-dharma and nivṛtāvyākṛta-dharma.
8) There are two types of undefiled dharma (akliṣṭa-dharma): kuśala-dharma and nivṛtāvyākṛta-dharma. In addition, ālambana-prahāṇa applies in cases where matter (rūpa) is abandoned. Cf. AKBh. (p. 236.10–13), AKBh. (p. 321.1–2).
9) Arhats are said to create only two types of karma: immediately effective karma (dṛṣṭadharmaniya-karman) and indeterminate karma (aniyata-karman). Immediately effective karma brings about retribution fruit in this life and does not lead to existence in a next life. Indeterminate karma is weak karma that does not necessarily have to receive retribution fruit, and those who have become Arhats can extinguish this. Cf. Shimizu Toshifumi 清水俊史, “Fujō-gō to kiu-gō” 不定業と既定業 [An-
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10) Cf. Dhammasaṅgani (pp. 120.12–123.6), Vijñānakāya vols. 13–15 (Taisho, vol. 26 pp. 593b9–606a4).

〈Key words〉 Karma, Kamma, Arhat

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