Phaladāna and Prāpti in Sarvāstivāda

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Introduction  This paper discusses the Sarvāstivāda doctrine on the relationship between an acquisition (prāpti) and the actual giving of a fruit (phaladāna). There are currently two theories about Sarvāstivāda's understanding of the question "How is a past karma able to give a retribution fruit in the future?"

One is the Wogihara Unrai theory, 1) which states that a karma can cause a result even if no intermediary connects this karma to a retribution fruit. This can happen through the doctrine known as the projection of a fruit (phalapratigraha) and actual giving of a fruit (phaladāna), as shown in the following illustration:

![Diagram showing the relationship between karma, phalapratigraha, phaladāna, and retribution.

The Wogihara theory has two parts. First, the moment a sentient being (sattva) creates some karma, the time and type of retribution fruit is appointed—termed as the projection of a fruit (phalapratigraha). Second, at the appointed time, a past karma can directly cause a retribution fruit to occur without an intermediary—termed as the actual giving of a fruit (phaladāna). This happens even though a karmic act has already faded into the past.

Another theory is that of Katō Seishin. 2) Although this theory emulates the Wogihara theory, it supposes that for a karma to cause a future retribution fruit, it must be continually linked to the sentient being (sattva) by an adhesive element referred to as an acquisition (prāpti).

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Currently, the Wogihara theory has been accepted as established, and the Katō theory has been disregarded. The reasons are thought to be two-fold. First, Funahashi Issai has examined both Katō and Wogihara theories and stated that the Wogihara theory has the most merit. Second, Katō did not show sufficient grounds for his argument within his thesis.

Regardless, there are some researches that refer to the Katō’s theory. Within examinations of the dharmāvipraṇāśakāraṇa of Sammitiya, Nasu Yoshihiko touches on Katō’s theory. Also, Matsushima Hisakami indirectly refers to Katō’s theory in his examination of the argument on impermanence in the Nyāyānusāra. Within Dhammajoti’s outline of the Sarvāstivāda doctrine, he asserts a relationship between the actual giving of a fruit (pahladāna) and an acquisition (prāpti). Nevertheless, neither Nasu nor Matsushima attempt to elucidate Sarvāstivāda’s discussion of karma. Additionally, Dhammajoti does not offer grounds for his argument based on references; thus far, it is unclear precisely how an acquisition (prāpti) influences the actual giving of a fruit (pahladāna). Hence, this paper considers this point and re-examines Katō’s theory.

1. Initially, this chapter examines an acquisition’s influence on the actual giving of a fruit (pahladāna). Consider a case of karma A and karma B. Karma A is linked to the sentient being (sattva) via an acquisition (prāpti), but karma B is not; we have seen examples in documents where karma A preferentially brings about a retribution fruit by determining the next world. In a typical example, one is reborn in an upper meditation stage. According to this basic understanding of Sarvāstivāda, if one dies after acquiring a higher level of meditation in the present world, one is reborn at the same stage of meditation in the next world. In the case of a sentient being (sattva) living in the sensual sphere (kāmadhātu) and being reborn into the next world in the first stage of meditation, the being will create a karma
pertaining to the first stage of meditation by having acquired the first meditation in the present world. This karma brings about a retribution fruit referred to as the “rebirth of the first stage of meditation.” However, in this case, the sentient being (sattva) in the present world also naturally creates a karma pertaining to the sensual sphere (kāmadihātu) on account of carrying on everyday life. Therefore, a doctrinal explanation is necessary to understand why a karma pertaining to the first meditation preferentially brings about a retribution fruit, more so than a karma pertaining to the sensual sphere (kāmadhihātu). Sarvāstivāda explains this problem thus: This karma is determinant of the actual giving of a fruit (phasisāna) precisely because this karma pertaining to the first meditation is linked to the sentient being (sattva) via an acquisition (prāpti).

This is concisely explained by the example of the saint at the rank of ārthāvasrotas who practiced a mixture of meditation that was both free of outflow (anāsrava) and with outflow (sāsrava). In one lifetime, this saint acquired the first through the fourth meditation. However, after his death, he was believed to have been reborn in the first stage of meditation. It follows that because of his practice, this saint created four kinds of karma pertaining to the first through the fourth meditations. Although he created these various types of karma, he was reborn in the first stage. The doctrinal basis for a karma pertaining to the first meditation determining the next world is explained as, “this saint experienced retrogression (parihita) from the upper three stages of meditation.”

In the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya (P. Pradhan, ed., Patna, 1967, p. 347.17–20, AKBh.), retrogression (parihita) is defined as non-possession (asamanvāgama). In other words, karmas that pertained to the meditation were relinquished because of retrogression (parihita), and these karmas completely lost their effect; the effect that could be manifested sprang from a karma that continued to be in possession (samanvāgata) because of an acquisition (prāpti), but this karma pertained only to the first meditation. The following illustration shows how the karma is possessed via an acquisition (prāpti) prior to and after retrogression (parihita).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fourth meditation</th>
<th>Prior to retrogression</th>
<th>Possession/relinquishment of a karma (= a cause for a retribution fruit)</th>
<th>After retrogression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Third meditation</td>
<td>possession</td>
<td>possession/relinquishment of a karma (= a cause for a retribution fruit)</td>
<td>possession/relinquishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second meditation</td>
<td>possession</td>
<td>possession/relinquishment of a karma (= a cause for a retribution fruit)</td>
<td>possession/relinquishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First meditation</td>
<td>possession</td>
<td>possession/relinquishment of a karma (= a cause for a retribution fruit)</td>
<td>possession/relinquishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destination of rebirth after death</td>
<td>Fourth mediation</td>
<td>Possession/relinquishment of a karma (= a cause for a retribution fruit)</td>
<td>First meditation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For arguments sake, let's assume an explanation of the connection between a karma and a fruit using only the doctrine of projection of a fruit (phalapratigraha) / actual giving of a fruit (phaladāna). It stands to reason that a karma being possessed because of an acquisition (prāpti) does not influence the actual giving of a fruit. However, this example suggests that karmic possession or relinquishment dictates whether a fruit of a karma is actually given. The saint is reborn in the first stage of meditation, not the second to fourth meditation stages, because karmas pertaining to the upper three meditation stages are not linked to the saint via an acquisition (prāpti); only a karma pertaining to the first meditation stage is linked to the saint.

2. However, we have also acknowledged the possibility of a karma bringing about a fruit even if that karma is not linked to a sentient being (sattva) via an acquisition (prāpti). Then, one is reborn because of the power of a determinate karma (niyata-karman), that is, a karma whose retribution can be experienced in a future life subsequent to the next (aparaparyāyavedaniya). The Mahāvibhāṣāstra, vol. 161 (Taisho, vol. 27, p. 816c5–11) explains that even if one does not acquire the upper stages of meditation in the present world, one may be reborn at these stages in the next world. This happens in the following two cases.

A Even if one has not acquired the basic stage (maula) of an upper level meditation, one can be reborn in the next world at a particular upper stage of meditation by becoming separate from the lower stages of meditation by acquiring the prefatory stage (sāmantaka) of the upper level meditation.

B Even if a particular stage of meditation is not acquired at all, one can be reborn into the next world at that stage because of a retribution fruit for a karma whose retribution can be experienced in a future life subsequent to the next (aparaparyāyavedaniya).

In the case of B, a karma brings about a retribution fruit even though the acquisition-series is broken. For instance, a sentient being (sattva) lives in the sensual sphere (kāmadhātu) while in the present world and then dies without an acquisition of meditation. The being is then reborn into the next world at the third stage of meditation because of a karma created in their past life. This karma they created in their past life was a karma whose retribution can be experienced in a future life subsequent to the next (aparaparyāyavedaniya).

This karma whose retribution can be experienced in a future life subsequent to the next (aparaparyāyavedaniya) is a dharma that pertains to the third stage of meditation within the material sphere (rūpadhātu). Dharmas pertaining to a material sphere (rūpadhātu) are
relinquished through conditions of “retrogression” (parihiṇa) and a “change of stage” (bhūmisāṃcāra). When some dharma is relinquished, an acquisition-series linking that dharma to a sentient being (sattva) breaks simultaneously. For the above case, when one is born into the present world in the sensual sphere (kāmadhātu), conditions of a change of stage (bhūmisāṃcāra) apply. Therefore, even if one acquired all things pertaining to the material sphere (rūpadhātu), all these things have already been relinquished. Thus, we can acknowledge that a karma whose retribution can be experienced in a future life subsequent to the next (that was created in a past life) can create an actual giving of a fruit (phaladāna). This is the case even if an acquisition (prāpti) does not link a karma to the sentient being (sattva).

Furthermore, in the above case, only determinate karma whose retribution can be experienced in a future life subsequent to the next (aparaparyāyavedanīya) is referenced, while indeterminate karma (aniyata-karman) is not. Determinate karma (niyata-karman) is powerful that definitely brings about a retribution fruit at a determined time. It is believed that even Arhat himself cannot change this. Indeterminate karma (aniyata-karman), however, is believed to be weak. This karma’s retribution fruit does not have fixed timing and may or may not result in a retribution fruit. Accordingly, we can consider the following two-part conjecture about a possible relationship between a karma and an acquisition (prāpti), while keeping in mind the doctrine of determinate karma (niyata-karman) versus indeterminate karma (aniyata-karman). First, because determinate karma (niyata-karman) is strong, it can possibly bring about the retribution fruit even if it is not linked to a sentient being (sattva) via an acquisition (prāpti). Second, indeterminate karma (aniyata-karman) is relatively weak and has little influence; therefore, if it is not linked to a sentient being (sattva) via an acquisition (prāpti), it can not bring about a retribution fruit.

**Conclusion** This paper discussed the principles of karmic effects in the Sarvāstivāda tradition, identifying the following points:

1. The relationship between a karma and its effects are explained in the Sarvāstivāda tradition by the doctrine of the projection of the fruit (phalapratigrha) and the actual giving of the fruit (phaladāna). It is considered that a karma can produce the retribution fruit in the future even if the karma has faded into the past.
2. However, an example showed that when two types of karma exist (i.e., karma that has been acquired and karma that has not), the acquired karma takes priority in bringing about the actual giving of the fruit (phaladāna). In a typical example, once one acquires a meditation stage in the
present world, one is reborn into that stage in the next world. In this case, an acquisition-series exists from when a karma is created until the actual giving of the fruit (phaladāna) takes place.

3. However, in some acknowledged examples, even when a karma has not been acquired, the actual giving of a fruit (phaladāna) takes place. This is true for determinate karma (niyata-karman) whose retribution can be experienced in a future life subsequent to the next (aparaparāyavedaniya). According to the Sarvāstivāda understanding, it is not necessarily essential for an intermediary (that replaces a karma that has faded into the past and bears the actual giving of a fruit) to exist as a chain between the karma and the fruit.

Thus, the connection between a karma and its fruit in Sarvāstivāda is explained by the doctrine of the projection of the fruit (phalapratigraha) and the actual giving of a fruit (phaladāna). This doctrine is based on the theory of dharmas existing in the Three Times. It is believed that an acquisition (prāpti) influences the actual giving of a fruit (phaladāna). Therefore, we can conclude that both Katō and Wogihara theories are partly valid.

Notes
2) (a) Katō Seishin 加藤精, “Gōkan engi-ron no gokai ni tsuite” 業感縁起論の誤解に就いて [Misconceptions regarding the karma causation theory], Taishō Daigaku gakuhō 3 (1928); (b) Katō Seishin, “U-bu no gōkan engi-ron ni tsuite” 有部の業感縁起論に関て [Karma causation theory of the Sarvāstivādins], Taishō Daigaku gakuhō 5 (1929).
4) Katō’s study was only a short two pages, and it is difficult to grasp the whole picture that it presents. Katō cites the Mahāvibhāṣāstra, vol. 125 (Taisho, vol. 27, p. 652a8–29) as the basis for his view that “a karma continues to be linked to a sentient being (sattva) via an acquisition (prāpti) until the moment it causes a retribution of fruit.” However, this does not necessarily support the grounds of his argument because immediately before the passage is referred to, it is expounded that “even if a karma is not linked by an acquisition (prāpti), that karma always produces a retribution of fruit.” Moreover, he references another passage of the Mahāvibhāṣāstra, vol. 121 (Taisho, vol. 27, p. 632b12–15), but a description of this passage is completely unrelated to an actual giving of a fruit (phaladāna).
6) Matsushima Hisakami, “Samghabhadra on karma and Momentariness,” Indogaku Bukkyōgaku
Phaladāna and Prāpti in Sarvāstivāda (T. Shimizu)

kenkyū 58, no. 3 (2010).

7) KL Dhammajoti, Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma, 4th rev. ed. (Hong Kong: Centre for Buddhist Studies, 2009), p. 376.11-17, p. 401.4-8, p. 402.30-33.

8) Dhammajoti’s implication is extremely sharp, but he confuses the notion of series (santati) with that of acquisition/relinquishment (prāpti/tyāga). It is impossible for acquisition-series to continue even after relinquishment (tyāga). Relinquishment (tyāga) and non-acquisition (aprāpti) are synonymous. Cf. AKBh. (p. 209.4-15, p. 210.4-10, pp. 210.19-211.4).

9) Cf. AKBh. (p. 359.14-18).


11) “Possession” (samanvāgama) is a different name for an acquisition (prāpti). The condition of an acquisition (prāpti) continually arising and linking a sentient being (sattva) to some continuous dharma is “possession.” For the differences in the meanings of “possession” (samanvāgama), “acquisition” (prāpti), and “obtainment” (lābha), please refer to AKBh. (p. 62.14-16).

12) Non-defined (avyākṛta) karmas are not a cause for a retribution fruit, so it is not included within the chart.

13) This is not to declare that one will be reborn in the fourth stage of meditation. However, retrogression (parihīna) and rebirth are explained in close relation to one another. Therefore, when a sentient being (sattva) stays in the state of having acquired a karma pertaining to the fourth stage of meditation, it is thought that the sentient being (sattva) is reborn in the fourth stage of meditation.

14) According to the Mahāvibhāṣāstra, vol. 161 (Taisho, vol. 27, p. 816b10-20) the sūtras explain only the pattern whereby “when some meditation is acquired in the present world, the being is born into the next world at that meditation stage.”

15) Cf. AKBh. (p. 224.17-20). Dharmas that pertains to the immaterial sphere (ārūpyadharma) are also relinquished via a “change in stage” (bhūmisāmcāra) and “retrogression” (parihīna). Moreover, a portion of dharma that pertain to the material sphere (in particular, nirvedhabhāgyadharma) is relinquished by death as well. Cf. AKVy. (pp. 387.27-388.3).

16) However, this does not mean that an acquisition (prāpti) becomes the bearer of the actual giving of a fruit (phaladāna) in place of a karma that has faded into the past.

Keywords: karman, phala, phaladāna, prāpti

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