

Lesson 4 on 27/10/04 by Dr. Bhikkhuni Bodhi

This is a personal note on lecture by Dr. Bhikkhuni Bodhi on Historical Survey of Buddhist Thought. This is Module 3 and the last module of the Diploma Course in Buddhist Studies conducted at the Buddhist Library by the Graduate School of Buddhist Studies (Singapore). For other lesson updates please go to: www.geocities.com/lee_mengkai/

Continuation on Vibhajjavāda (Pali: Vibhajjavāda)

Karma

There is a difference in the karma doctrine between the Vibhajjavādin and the Sarvāstivādin mainly because of the Sarvāstivādin's theory of Svabhava and also their understanding that dhamma exists in all three periods of time.

The Vibhajjavādin's way of thinking of how karma comes down from one life to another or from one moment to another moment is a horizontal way. From this present moment what is past, they will come down to the next moment and the next moment or all the five aggregates plus all your karmic forces, all of your understanding, experience and so on. This is incidentally how the Sautrāntika, the opponent of the Sarvāstivādin, thinks.

But for the Sarvāstivādin they don't think it this way. From them the karma will be slightly this way (Ven. Bodhi drew a horizontal line across) because dhamma exist in the past, present and future or exist as real dhamma in the past, present and future. So whatever past karma we have done, through the mechanism called *avijñapti*, which will never be lost as it is a force left behind by our verbal and physical karma. Once we do something with a strong intention, let say we hate cat and killed a cat, with a very strong intention when we see a cat, we killed the cat. After killing the cat it is not finished yet as something is left behind due to our action and intention of killing the cat. These two things – intention and action, added up to give a force called *avijñapti*. Because of *avijñapti* this gives rise to result in the future. Although this present action of killing the cat is already passed and it would mean nothing without volition as both volition and action has already passed. Without the action, the volition is just mental and cannot bring about karma. And without volition, the karma would mean nothing. This is something Ven. Bodhi thinks. Because the action of taking a knife and stabbing in the context without volition is just an action of stabbing, there is no moral content. The moral content comes when there is volition of killing. When we take up a knife with a strong volition of killing, that action of stabbing would have moral content and that moral content would have cause *avijñapti* to arise. *Avijñapti* is the Sarvāstivādin's conception of volition *plus* the action, be it verbal or physical. So that is how they explained how karma gets passed out from moment to moment.

In my notes I have given you a comparison on how the two schools, the Vibhajjavāda and the Sarvāstivāda understand the essence of physical and verbal karma. To the Sarvāstivādin the essence of physical and verbal karma is not volition but to the Vibhajjavādin they are. The Vibhajjavādin said that only *cetanā* is the source of all action, be it mental, physical or verbal. Anything that we say can be volition with intention to hurt. For example we say something, when we curse, that is a verbal expression of our volition. Hence for the Vibhajjavādin, firstly we must have the intention. For example an unwholesome mind arises when we see our enemy and we want to hurt our enemy. But at that time we don't have any weapon so we just want to say something with an intention to spike our enemy. So that *intention* to say something to spike our enemy will cause us to say something, for example a bad word. So that bad word is an expression of our *cetanā*. So *cetanā* means volition and to the Vibhajjavādin, our verbal expression has *cetana* as essence. Verbal is nothing, is not a real dharma, it is just an expression of our intention. Similarly, our physical action is just an expression of our intention. Our karma is the expression of *cetanā*. For example when we see someone we like very much and we wanted to buy a gift for him or her. The actual act of buying and giving is an expression of our intention and it is not a karma or dharma on its own.

Hence the *physical action* (in Pali is called *kāya-karma*) is a *physical expression* (in Pali is called *kāya-viññatti*) of *cetanā*. Similarly *verbal action* (in Pali is called *vāca-karma*) is a *verbal expression* (in Pali is called *vāca-viññatti*) of *cetanā*. Both *kāya-viññatti* and *vāca-viññatti* have no real essence of their own and they are not real dharma to the Vibhajavādin.

The Sanskrit term for *viññatti* is *vijñapti*. For the Sarvāstivādin *vijñapti* is real dharma, not just an expression. For the Vibhajavādin, physical action (*kāya-karma*) is understood as a physical expression (*kāya-viññatti*) of our intention or *cetanā* or volition. Therefore physical action is equal to physical expression of volition. We know a person's intention by his action. For example if we see person A hitting person B, we know that person A has got intention of hurting person B. That action of person A hitting person B is called physical expression of intention. Similarly if we scold someone, it is a verbal expression of *cetanā*. But sometime we don't want people to know; it's all inside us then its only mental karma, no physical or mental action. So there is no way other people would know.

For the Sarvāstivāda, mental action *does not* give fruit to future result in the sense that something happen to us due to our past mental karma. But whatever bad thought we have will actually cause more future bad thoughts and it become *habitual tendency* if we don't do anything about it. That is when we are unconscious about this *cetanā* and let it develop further on its own and become snowball effect. So that the next time it will be strong enough for us to actually do something. Although *cetanā* or mental karma in the Sarvāstivāda's system does not have real world result it will bring about some action in the future if we don't curb it.

The Vibhajavādin believed what the Buddha said, "monks , I tell you there is only *cetanā* and *cetanā* is action, *cetanā* is karma". So as long as we have *cetanā* there is action. Whether mental counts or not Ven. Bodhi is not very clear about it for the Vibhajavādin. But at least she knows that physical and verbal action do count and to them these two are just expression of *cetanā* and without *cetanā* then physical and verbal action would not exist. This is apart from spontaneous action like breathing that does not need *cetanā*. Hence for the Vibhajavāda, *cetanā* means action with moral content, whether wholesome, unwholesome or neutral. Neutral means no moral content like when we are thirsty we go drink water, the action of drinking has no moral content.

Kāya-karma or physical action is just physical expression of *cetanā* through the body. Verbal action is just *cetanā* being shown verbal expression. The term *Viññatti* in Sanskrit is called *vijñapti* when we come to Sarvāstivāda. For the Sarvāstivāda, *vijñapti* is *not* just an expression of *cetanā*. It is a *real* dharma. Once we have *cetanā* it will cause us to do something, for example holding a knife and killing a cat. But holding a knife and killing the cat, the action of holding a knife and stabbing the cat is real dharma. But how can action be real dharma since it is only a movement? For the Sarvāstivādin it is not the movement but the change in configuration of our body (*saṁsthana*) or the change in the shape of our body. Before we take up a knife the body is in a certain shape and when we pick up the knife the body is in another shape, when we start stabbing the body is in another shape. These are called *configuration* or *shape* of our body. To the Sarvāstivāda, *saṁsthana* is a real dharma. Therefore *kāya-vijñapti* or physical action which is *saṁsthana* is real because *saṁsthana* is real. Sound is classified in Abhidhamma as a *rūpa* dharma and since *rūpa* is real dharma therefore sound is real too. To the Sarvāstivādin verbal actions are actually sound with content but because sound itself is *rūpa* so as a form of *vijñapti* it is also real.

Hence the difference between the Vibhajādin and the Sarvāstivādin is that physical and verbal action are just an expression of *cetanā* and not real for the Vibhajavādin even though they give it a name called *viññatti*. *Viññatti* is equal to karma and is equal to expression of *cetanā*. But when it comes to the Sarvāstivāda, whatever happens is *cetanā* and is already one moment passed. What *cetanā* tells the body to do and when the body actually does it, there is a change in the bodily configuration in which there is a change in shape and shape is a real dharma. Therefore *kāya-vijñapti* is real dharma. Similarly for verbal dharma, which is sound and sound is a real dharma therefore *vāca-vijñapti* is also real. Hence the essence of all actions whether verbal or physical for the Sarvāstivāda is not *cetanā* it is *saṁsthana* and *sabda*.

For the Sarvāstivāda cetanā is volition that tells our body to do something and once our body actually does something it is on its own, just that the action has cetanā as the *cause*. An action is just a physical action without volition. Like take a knife and killed someone. Taking up a knife and stabbing is just an action and that action itself has no moral content or rather the killing itself has no moral content. Because if a lunatic who does it, he doesn't know the consequence or he isn't sure that he has cetanā and he is just overcome by his urge to kill for whatever reasons. In some man-made laws they say lunatic is not responsible but in Buddhism there is still some karmic retribution, just that it is not as bad as a person who is fully aware of what he is doing. The cetanā is not as strong or heavy as the person who is sane. So whatever cetanā that causes the lunatic to kill, his action as compared to a person who has full understanding of what he is doing is much less or different. Therefore physical action without cetanā does not mean anything or it has no karmic retribution. Similarly an expression of past dharma for the Sarvāstivāda, if the past karma is samīsthana, is taken out of the cetanā of moral context means nothing, just a past karma. Similarly when cetanā is not expressed through physical and verbal action is only mental action, for the Sarvāstivāda's system mental action does not incur karmic retribution. Therefore for them samīsthana without cetanā has no karma and cetanā without samīsthana has no karma. Only when cetanā *plus* samīsthana then it is real. The force of our action will give rise to another dharma called avijñāpti. Vijñāpti is an expression or something that we can see and when we add "a" in front it is negated which means something that is not manifested or seen. This goes to show that it is something left behind by our vijñāpti. Vijñāpti is something we can see and is an expression, the Vibhajjavādin and the Sarvāstivādin shared the same term but their understanding of these terms are different. The Vibhajjavādin thinks that vijñāpti is just an expression of cetanā. But for the Sarvāstivādin think that vijñāpti is real dharma because for them the essence for kāya-vijñāpti is shape and the essence of vocal vijñāpti is sound and these are real. Therefore they are real and they will give avijñāpti, which will stay on with us forever and ever until conditions to arise for fruit to take place. If we accidentally killed a cat, then in the Sarvāstivādin system there is no karma as there is no cetanā. Karma does not only refer to action alone in the Sarvāstivādin system, it includes intention also. And intention in the Sarvāstivādin system can also be mitigated by other caittas. Hence if the volition is not very strong the action will not bring about retribution in the future. Also in the Sarvāstivāda there are three types of karma, namely mental karma, physical karma and vocal karma. If mental karma, which is cetanā, is strong enough, it will bring about physical and verbal karma. If it is not strong enough, it is just an activity in the mind.

For the Vibhajjavādin cetanā is karma and it is expressed by means of either physical or verbal action. So every physical and mental action goes back to our mental karma.

So far the Vibhajjavādin and the Sarvāstivādin both agreed that cetanā is mental karma but the action, whether verbal or physical action is also a real dharma, which has their own essence for the Sarvāstivādin. Physical karma has essence in shape of the body and verbal action has sound as its essence. Through our body, action is done and without action there is no karmic retribution. Therefore mental karma has no retribution but physical and verbal action there is retribution. Karmic force is kept in a force called avijñāpti.

The above is a brief karma theory of the two major schools.

Sarvāstivāda

Please remember that Sarvāstivāda is also a Theravāda school. It is just an opposite school of the Vibhajjavāda. These two schools came to oppose each other over the question of whether dharma exists in three periods of time or not. That is why the Sarvāstivādin has a theory called sarvaṁ-asti, which means everything exists which means dharma in the past, present and future exist as a real entity.

For the Vibhajyavādin, they got their name because it discriminates, not all dharma exists, and in the sense only present dharma exists. Past and future dharmas are not real and do not exist. The *Kāsyapīya* tried to merge the two schools.

The Sarvāstivāda is a very powerful school and gradually overtook the Vibhajyavādin in terms of influence. By the time of the 5th century A.D. it had become so powerful that the whole of India was engaged in many Abhidharmic debates and philosophical research and understanding due to their influence. Within the Sarvāstivāda community there were monks and nuns who went round preaching but most of them would be engaged in Abhidharmic studies. Abhidharmikas are people who specialize in the study of Abhidharma. Hence the Abhidharmikas were the more influential people at that time.

Canonical texts and period of influence

From Venerable Bodhi's notes there are 7 canonical treatises, the same as the Vibhajyavāda. So we can see the rivalry between the two schools. What the Vibhajyavādin has the Sarvāstivādin also have and what the Sarvāstivāda has the Vibhajyavādin will eventually have. They tried to outdo one another. But at least the Vibhajyavādin text the came down to us where we still have them now are in Pali. We don't know about the *Kāsyapīya* or the *Dharmaguptaka* and the rest but probably they are written in Sanskrit because Sanskrit is *the* language at that time in India, just like English now is *the* language. But the only Vibhajyavādin school now left is the *Tāmasāṭīya* in Sri Lanka who preserved their text in Pali. So the only Vibhajyavādin text is in Pali and probably at that time they also have Sanskrit but now what we have in Vibhajyavādin is only Pali while the Sarvāstivādin text are written in Sanskrit. So to study texts of both schools we need to know both Pali and Sanskrit.

The dating of texts are not easy because Indians during that time do not write down time and even the authors are not named. Buddhist scholars have to do a lot of guesswork to identify the authors and the date of their writings. The most important text in these 7 canonical treatises is called *Jñānaprathāna* which is the body. Lucky for us the Sarvāstivādin texts were preserved in Chinese and you can look them up in the Chinese Tripitakas. Next are the limbs which is next in importance to the body or *Jñānaprathāna* (JPS). Because *Jñānaprathāna* is the defining text and with this text the Sarvāstivāda is formally established as a school and all their floating thoughts are collected in this book. Before the JPS there were two texts called *Dharmaskandha-sāstra* (pre-JPS) and *Sangīti-paryāya-sāstra* (pre-JPS). These two texts were already around before *Jñānaprathāna* is being compiled but because not all the ideas in these two pre-JPS were representative of the Sarvāstivādin so only when the *Jñānaprathāna* is compiled then we have the Sarvāstivāda formally formed. *Prajñapti-sāstra* (completed form: post-JPS, circa beginning of 1st century A.D) is the only *sāstra* that Xuan Zang did not complete in translation because unfortunately he passed away. He managed to translate the rest like *Prajñapti-sāstra* (completed form: post-JPS, circa beginning of 1st century A.D); *Prakarana-sāstra* (1st century A.D); *Vijñānakāya-sāstra* (beginning of 1st century A.D); *Dhātukāya-sāstra* (slightly earlier than MVS because not quoted by MVS). For details on each text, please read up the book by Venerable Yinshun in Chinese called *A study of treatises and Abhidharmika masters based on Sarvāstivāda*.

The above are canonical texts and there are also many commentaries. From the first text in the mid 2nd century B.C. to 5th century A.D. roughly 800 years of Sarvāstivāda influence in India. In each generation there are commentaries and can you imagine the amount of commentaries written. Three of the most important commentaries were namely, *Mahāvibhāsa* (commentary of JPS; mid 2nd century A.D); *Abhidharmkośabhāsyā* of Vasubandhu (5th century A.D) and *Nyāyanusāra* of Sanghabhadra (contemporary of AKB). *Mahāvibhāsa* is a commentary on *Jñānaprathāna*. There are other sub-commentaries on *Mahāvibhāsa*. *Abhidharmkośabhāsyā* of Vasubandhu is the most famous Sarvāstivāda text. Others can be ignorance about *Mahāvibhāsa* or *Jñānaprathāna* but anyone who does Buddhist philosophy and discuss about the Sarvāstivāda they definitely come across *Abhidharmkośabhāsyā* (AKB) of Vasubandhu. Before AKB Vasubandhu actually wrote *kārikā* text first, which contained whole of Sarvāstivādin's doctrine in verses.

The Sarvāstivādin were proud of their Abhidharmic tradition. Their regions of influence (refer to map of India) were mainly in Kaśmīra and Gandhāra, but their stronghold was in Kaśmīra. They were so proud of their teachings that it was highly guarded from the rest of Sarvāstivādin monks outside of Kaśmīra and they do not allowed outsiders to come in Kaśmīra to come in and learned Sarvāstivādin's doctrine. They want to monopolize and were known as *the* orthodox Sarvāstivāda Abhidharmika school. Outsiders cannot challenge them as they do not know what was taught in Kaśmīra. An outsider called Vasubandhu came up with an idea, he sneaked inside Kaśmīra and learned the orthodox Sarvāstivādin doctrine. According to the legend he was prevented from getting out of Kaśmīra and he started writing his commentaries of the Sarvāstivādin doctrine. His teacher who is an arahant, can read his mind and told Vasubandhu about the danger of spreading the orthodox teachings of Sarvāstivāda outside. He was eventually let out of Kaśmīra. Once outside Vasubandhu started writing in verses (*kārikā*) all that he knew about the teachings of Sarvāstivāda ābhidharma and also those points that he didn't think is correct. He tried to present it in his own interpretation. He sent *kārikā* casted in gold plates back to the king in Kaśmīra and initially the Sarvāstivādin were very happy because at least now people understand their teachings. But his teachers was not very happy as his *kārikā* contained some of Vasubandhu own understanding that were not the orthodox teachings of the Sarvāstivādin. So his teacher influenced the king in Kaśmīra to ask Vasubandhu to write his commentary on his *kārikā* and he called it *Abhidharmkośabhāṣya*. In this work it contained all the teachings of the orthodox teachings of the Sarvāstivāda and also some related teachings of the Sautrāntika. So it is no longer orthodox and also Vasubandhu in this work pointed out the weakness in the Sarvāstivāda teachings. He asked very sharp questions about the Sarvāstivādin teachings. Now the main opponents of the Sarvāstivāda is no longer the Vibhajyavādin but the Sautrāntika. So what is worse is someone who wrote criticism of the Sarvāstivādin and also included teachings of its main opponents into one work. So the people in Kaśmīra were very angry with Vasubandhu and a very orthodox Sarvāstivādin, named Saṅghabhadra spent 12 years to write an anti- *Abhidharmkośabhāṣya* text called *Nyāyanusara*. It is a critique of AKB because he thought that AKB is not representative of the orthodox teachings of the Sarvāstivādin.

These two texts (AKB and *Nyāyanusara*) were very valuable in terms of understanding the historical development of the Sarvāstivāda's thought. Because Vasubandhu wrote his work properly as he has the training of the Sarvāstivāda and he also quoted a lot from the *Mahāvibhāṣa*. From these two texts we know the response of the Sarvāstivādin and also how they explained their criticism of Vasubandhu. Hence from these two texts we can get a better picture of the teachings of the Sarvāstivādin.

Doctrines:

Due to lack of time Venerable Bodhi will not cover all his lecture notes and we have to read those not over here in her notes.

Svabhava

In understanding the teachings of the Sarvāstivāda, there are a few things we need to know and one of them is Svabhava. After the Mahāparinibbāna of the Buddha, his later disciple wanted to condense his teachings and they went through each Nikaya and extracted the main points. They came across some terms such as *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṃkharā*, *vitarka*, *vicara*, *pīti*, *sukha*, *ekagrata*, the *Four Noble Truth*, *Nibbāna* and so on. This is the first phrase where they gather all the technical terms which the Buddha used them again and again. The next phase is to categorize them in order to define them. They tried to follow the Buddha's teachings in using the 5 aggregates to categorize all these terms into rūpa, vedanā, saṃjñā, saṃskāra, vijñāna and asaṃskṛta (unconditioned).

As they classified all these terms they also tried to find out the essence of each terms. Gradually one school came out with the term *dharma*. In Buddhist scholarship there is no such thing as dharma theory. The term *dharma theory* is coined by Professor Karunadasa and it refers to how this concept came about. Dharma is actually the building

blocks of the universe. All these categories are actually building blocks of the universe. For example a human being is made up of the 5 aggregates, which are the building blocks of the universe. So these 5 aggregates are called *dharmas* because they cannot be broken down further.

With this idea of dharma, more questions arise. How do we define dharma? At least to the pioneers of the Sarvāstivādin, dharmas are *real* entity. But others will ask, what do you mean by real entity? To the Sarvāstivādin a real entity is a *force* with causal efficiency. Causal efficiency means it must be able to cause any of the six types of consciousness to arise. Anything that is causal efficient is called a dharma. Gradually the Sarvāstivādin streamlines their definition and says that a dharma is something that has a self-nature or *svabhava*. Self-nature or *svabhava* is defined as self characteristics, which means something that has a *specific unique function* of its own. For example the unique function of *saṃjñā* (*saññā*) is ideation, which causes our mind to give labels. For example when we see a person the idea of “name” comes to our mind. The idea of a *name* is caused by *saṃjñā*. *Samjñā* is a dharma, which has a force; a force of self-nature and self-nature is self-characteristics that has a unique function. So *saṃjñā* is a force that causes us to give labels or form concepts. A *man* is a concept and if we bring it to Mars nobody will know what it meant. Similarly it applies to table and so on, it is a conventionally agreed concept. So the dharma or force that causes ideation is called *saṃjñā*. This is how they started labeling forces as dharma. Another example is *rūpa* and they define the self-nature of *rūpa* as a force or dharma that is actually visible or resistance and inevitably they can be subjected to destruction by contact. This is how they came out with the definition of dharma. When they say *rūpa* is a dharma, it must be able to tell its self-nature or *svabhava* of *rūpa*.

Another specific thing about dharma that causes the Sarvāstivāda to be criticized by other schools is the belief that a dharma will never change its *svabhava*. That means the self-nature of a dharma will never change and it will always exist whether in the past mode, present mode or future mode. Other people criticize them as talking about *ātman*. In describing *svabhava* the underlining essence is exactly like *ātma* or Self, which the Buddha set out to destroy. In fact many believe in Self and in our daily usage of language Self is very much a conventional usage even among the Buddhists. So the Sarvāstivādin by saying a dharma is something that has *svabhava* that does not change, whether it is in the present, past or future is something like the *ātma*. So the Sarvāstivāda has to develop their philosophy to respond to this criticism and also they build their system or philosophy based on this *svabhava*. They think they are right in understanding the teachings of the Buddha in a right way by understanding dharma as not a personal thing but all things in this universe can be broken down into dharmas. And all these things we see in this universe are just factors interacting with each other, so their understanding is very impersonal and objective. Objective is not as oppose to subjective but being impersonal. It does not have the emotional and psychological background of a Self. They do not talk about “I” interact with another “I”. The Sarvāstivādin only think of the whole world as *forces* and each person is marked by a force called *citta*, which is the *only* personal dharma in their system. All the other forces are impersonal and only the *citta* is a personal force that activates all the other external forces and personalizes these forces, so that we have a unique individual. That is how we build up this false notion of Self. So to them there is no such thing as a Self but only forces and even *citta* is a force. We have to see through all these, through analysis and analysis to them is Abhidharma. To the Sarvāstivādin, Abhidharma is something very spiritual not philosophical, they don't start off with philosophy. They think Abhidharma is one way in understanding the whole teaching of the Buddha and rather the whole universe. It is only later that Abhidharma becomes a philosophy. Initially Abhidharma is called *pañña* or wisdom because it is something to aid in analyzing the whole universe and eventually we can have a whole list of dharma around and according to the Sarvāstivāda how these dharmas relate to or interact with each other.

Next week we will discuss *citta-caitta* theory .