

On the Ideas of “Karmic Retribution” and “Indestructibility of Spirit”

—A Study of Buddhism during the Eastern Chin dynasty—

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A major topic of discussion of early Chinese Buddhism was the idea of *samsāra*. It was because neither in Confucianism nor in Taoism was there a way of thinking to apprehend the present world in terms of causality covering the three periods of the past, present and future. Thus it happened that ever since the Latter Han dynasty around the second century A.D., the Buddhist theory of karmic retribution attracted the attention of people of the time, and became the basis upon which people believed or doubted Buddhism. Faced with the problem of how to accept this basic doctrine of Buddhism in the milieu of the Chinese traditional way of thinking critical of the theory of karmic retribution, various works on the theme of “karmic retribution” appeared, some written based upon the idea of “Will of Heaven” expounded in *I-ching* or Confucius’s *Analects*, others in relation to the thought of naturalness contained in the classics such as *Tao-tê-ching* or *Chuang-tzu*. Works such as Mou-tzu’s 牟子 *Li-hou-lun* 『理惑論』 (the date not yet ascertained), Sun-ch’o’s 孫綽 (4th c. A.D.) *Yü-tao-lun* 『喻道論』, Hsi-ch’ao’s (336-377) 郗超 *Fêng-fa-yao* 『奉法要』 squarely tackled the problem of “karmic retribution,” and Lo-han’s 羅含 (?-370) *Kéng-shêng-lun* 『更生論』 treated the theme of *samsāra*. At the same time, many authors, Confucian as well

as Taoist, severely accused the falsity of those discussions on "karmic retribution." Controversies between these two camps thus continued for a long time until the Liang dynasty of the sixth century A.D.

In the course of controversies on the veracity of the theory of "karmic retribution", there arose a debate on the existence or non-existence of a subject (神 *shên*; spirit) which receives karmic retributions, transmigrating throughout three periods of the past, present and future. There was an insistence that both mind and body perish for good because, since man's existence is limited to one lifetime, no mind can be expected to be reborn to receive any karmic retribution. In opposition to this Buddhists expounded the theory of the indestructibility of spirit, upholding the authenticity of the philosophy of karmic retribution in *samsāra*. So far as the theory of "karmic retribution" is concerned, there could be no problem at all since it constitutes an aspect of the theory of karma. When it comes to the problem of the theory of the indestructibility of spirit, however, it runs counter to the doctrine of *anātman* (selflessness) basic to Buddhism, which means that it had already stepped out of the boundary of Indian Buddhism into a characteristically Chinese interpretation of Buddhism. While it may be admitted that in the Chinese mentality the theory of karmic retribution and that of the indestructibility of spirit are not unrelated, it will be necessary for us to sharply distinguish these theories from Indian Buddhism as a thought based upon an alien principle, and to examine the implication in which the theory of karmic retribution developed into the theory of the indestructibility of spirit.

As Chinese Buddhist philosophy greatly developed or underwent great transformations by the activities of Kumārajīva, who came to China at the beginning of the fifth century A.D. and translated a number of Mahāyāna sūtras and śāstras, it is possible for us to divide and characterize the philosophical tendencies of Buddhism using him as a watershed. Contemporary to the non-Chinese Kumārajīva (ca. 350-409) and representative of Chinese Buddhist circle at the time, was Hui-yüan 慧遠 (334-416) of Mt. Lu-shan 廬山. Among his works, there are the following three treatises in which he dwelt extensively on the problem of “karmic retribution” or “spirit”: *San-pao-lun* 『三報論』, *Ming-pao-ying-lun* 『明報應論』, and *Sha-mén-fu-ching-wang-chê-lun* 『沙門不敬王者論』. In these three works, written during about the ten years between 394 and 404 A.D., we can perceive the development from the theory of “karmic retribution” to that of the “indestructibility of the spirit.” These were epochal works which redressed the shortcomings of the discussions of the above-mentioned authors. To sum up his conclusions in *San-pao-lun* Hui-yüan emphasizes the necessity of “karmic retribution,” but makes no reference at all to the transmigration of “spirit.” In the second work, *Ming-pao-ying-lun*, although he discusses the working of “spirit” with reference to “karmic retribution,” he never yet goes so far as to aver its “indestructibility.” It was not until he wrote the Chapter on “The body perishing; the spirit does not perish” in his *Sha-mén-fu-ching-wang-chê-lun* (“A śramana does not pay respect to Emperors”) that he openly insisted on the theory of “The indestructibility of spirit.”

Hui-yüan in this case couched in the same terminology the spirit 神 (*shên*; spirit) which transmigrates and receives karmic retributions and the spirit which delivers itself from the bondage of *samsāra* in the Triple World and enters the realm of *nirvāṇa*, that is, the spirit almost equivalent to Dharmakāya. Undoubtedly he laid emphasis on the latter. Consequently, it follows that Hui-yüan considered “spirit” as a concept which unites unenlightened sentient beings who transmigrate throughout the triple world and the ultimate Dharmakāya. Thus, we may safely conclude that on this concept is significantly reflected the problem of Chinese Buddhism towards the end of the Eastern Chin dynasty when the study of the *Lotus Sūtra* remained immature and the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* had not yet been introduced in translation.