

The Transition of Dharma-interpretation in Buddhism

from Buddhaghosa to Bu ston

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First, following the treatises of Kanakura and Hirakawa, we have taken a general view of the meaning of “dharma” in the early Buddhism. According to them in order to clarify the meaning of “dharma” it is necessary to grasp “the inherent idea which is consistently found among the various meanings of dharma”. Kanakura considers the inherent idea of dharma as “that which holds human beings”.

Buddhaghosa is a representative Buddhist scholar for Southern Buddhism, whose classification of the meanings of “dharma” has been introduced and studied by many scholars and is well known. Vasubandhu also, who was a Northern Buddhist scholar contemporary with Buddhaghosa, has such a classification in his *Vyākhyāyukti*, but it has not been well studied. Moreover, the Tibetan Buddhist scholar Bu ston (1290–1364) made a detailed analysis of the meaning of “dharma” based on Vasubandhu’s classification. Bu ston’s analysis also, which is found in his *History of Buddhism* and was published in English translation by Obermiller, does not seem to have been noticed so far. So I have presented Vasubandhu’s classification of the meanings of “dharma” using Bu ston’s *History of Buddhism*. Bu ston studied dharma under four aspects, i. e., A: the various cases in which the term “dharma” is used, B: the meaning of the term

“ dharma ”, C : the definition of dharma, D : the kinds of dharma.

The usages of the term “ dharma ” enumerated in *Vyākhyāyukti* which are used in Bu ston’s analysis A do not seem to be much different from Buddhaghosa’s classification. It is noteworthy that Bu ston ascertains “ that which holds ” as the base meaning of “ dharma ” in his analysis B. For, as pointed out by Ui, the etymological meaning of the term is not discerned in the Pāli commentaries, and it is very important to determine the base meaning of the term in order to grasp “ the inherent idea which is consistently found among the various meanings of dharma ” as asserted by Kanakura, and moreover we have to take account of the recent assertion that the base meaning of the term “ dharma ” is not “ that which holds ” but “ that which is held ”.

In the analyses C and D Bu ston defines dharma in the following way : scriptural-dharma (āgama-dharma) and realized-dharma (adhigama-dharma). Namely, Bu ston seems to understand that scriptures and what is expounded by them, i. e. Merit, the Path, Nirvāṇa and so on, can be called dharmas because they are the means to eliminate the obscurations of the afflictions and of what is to be known, when beings take them as objects.

Bu ston defines scriptural-dharma as words with which to enter the realized-dharma. It is remarkable that he describes two kinds of words. One is the words which are impressions arisen from Verbal Manifestation (prapañca), which are worldly and ordinary verbal expressions like horse, cow, etc., and are of same nature with Saṃsāra. The other is the twelvefold scripture. It is the effluent-result which can be a cause to realize the Dharmatā. And it is called the words of the effluent-result of the Dharmatā.

dhātu because it is the effluent-result which is the result of realizing the Dharmadhātu.

For Bu ston dharmas, whether they may be scriptural-dharmas or realized-dharmas, are the means to eliminate the obscurations of the afflictions and of what is to be known, by taking dharmas as objects. But though scriptural-dharmas are the means to obtain realized-dharmas which culminate in Nirvāṇa, they consist not only of words of the effluent-result of the Dharmadhātu, but also of worldly words which are impressions arisen from Verbal Manifestation and which cause Saṃsāra. This seems to be a fundamental problem. That is to say, Bu ston calls our attention to the fact that scriptural-dharmas have by nature a twofold possibility, that is, to lead beings to the Dharmadhātu and to cause Saṃsāra because they are words.

From the above it can clearly be said that Bu ston took the base meaning of the term “dharma” as “that which holds”, and that dharmas can be classified into scriptural-dharmas and realized-dharmas, and also that the nature of scriptural-dharmas, which are the means to obtain the realized-dharmas, are words which have a double character connected with Saṃsāra as well as with Nirvāṇa. In this way Bu ston grasps dharmas as closely related to words, as far as we Pṛthagjanas are concerned at least. This is a remarkable point which has not yet been brought to our attention in studies based on Pāli sources.