

Paṭiccasamuppāda

Different English terms used: Conditionality, Conditional Genesis, Theory of Causation, Causal Genesis, Dependent Origination, Interdependent Origination, Theory of Cause and Effect, Chain of Causation, Relativity etc.

The concept of *paṭiccasamuppada* can be considered as the central philosophy of Buddhism. It expresses the content of the Buddha's enlightenment. It is the concept in terms of which the fundamental teachings of the Buddha can be explained. The Buddha himself emphasized its importance when he said that he who sees *paṭiccasamuppada* sees the Dhamma. The Madhyamika system of Buddhist thought developed its interpretation of the Buddha's teaching entirely on the principle of dependent origination. Nagarjuna considers *paṭiccasamuppada* to be the Middle Way doctrine of the Buddha. Upatissa who later became one of the chief disciples of the Buddha by the name of Sariputta was attracted to the Buddha's path when he heard from Assaji that the essence of the Buddha's teaching is the causal dependence of things. Understanding the dependent origination of things enables a person to seek solutions to life's problems.

* Mahahatthipadopama Sutta: “Yo paṭiccasamuppadam passati, so dhammam passati. Yo dhammam passati, so paṭiccasamuppadam passati.”

* Venerable Assaji: “Ye dhamma hetuppabhava.”

→ Whatever that has arisen, there must be a cause.

→ also known as the doctrinal summary of Buddhism.

* Dhammacakkappavathana Sutta: “Yam kinca samudaya dhammam sabbam tam nirodhadhammam.”

→ Whatever is of the nature of arising is of the nature of ceasing.

The Buddha often used traditional terminology with new meanings in order to express his own vision into truth. But the term *paṭiccasamuppada* is altogether a new term that was coined by the Buddha. There were certain causal theories of a rudimentary form in pre-Buddhist thought. The Buddha realized that all existing theories were inadequate to express the nature of reality. The unique contribution of the Buddha to Indian thought was his middle way doctrine which avoided the two extremes of eternalism and annihilationism. The causal theories existing at that time subscribed to one of these extreme philosophical

positions. This is why the Buddha found it necessary to introduce a new term to express his vision into the nature of reality.

According to the Buddha, *paticcasamuppada* is not a metaphysical construction on his part. It is an order of nature to be discovered by intelligent beings. He says that whether Tathagatas are born or not, this order of nature (*dhammatthitata dhammaniyamata*) exists in the world. It is discovered by a Buddha and pointed out to others. It is not to be taken as a subjective philosophical thesis, but as a principle that governs occurrences in the physical universe and the psychological processes of living beings. It is discovered by careful observation of nature.

Sometimes the Buddha presents a general definition of the principle of dependent origination. The literal translation of the formulation of the general principle as occurring in the Suttas is as follows:

When this exists that exists

(imasmim sati idam hoti)

With the arising of this that arises

(imassa uppada idam uppajjati)

When this does not exist that does not exist

(imasmim asati idam na hoti)

With the cessation of this that ceases to be

(imassa nirodha idam nirujjhati)

Put in more modern terminology it could be expressed as follows:

If there is any relation between any two things or occurrences A and B such that whenever A exists B exists and with the arising of A, B arises, and when A does not exist B does not exist and with the cessation of A, B ceases to be, that relation may be called the dependent origination relation.

What the Buddha wanted to point out was that in the observed world there are things and occurrences which exhibit this relationship. It is an observable fact about the world. Things in the world do not happen merely by chance. There is a causal order or pattern which could be discovered. When this order or pattern of events is discovered it is possible to explain happenings, to solve practical problems of life and to predict the future course of events.

Having understood the general pattern of events, the Buddha applied this understanding to solve the problem of unsatisfactoriness in human life. The Buddha's principle of dependent origination may apply to many occurrences in the physical universe as well. But the Buddha was not interested in the application of the principle to make discoveries about the nature of the physical universe.

With the development of scientific method, physical scientists have made use of a similar principle to understand, explain, and control the events of the physical world. Modern science and technology could be understood as a consequence of the application of this principle to the natural physical world. The Buddha sometimes took examples from the physical world to illustrate the principle but did not use it to explain the world of physical nature. His main application of the principle was to understand and explain the nature of human existence and the whole cyclic process of samsaric *dukkha*. This application of the principle has produced the standard formula of dependent origination consisting of twelve factors. This formula is accepted by all schools of Buddhism although differences between Buddhist schools can be seen in later elaborations of the principle in their respective Abhidhamma traditions.

In the Suttas the Buddha sometimes applies the principle to show how the inner mental conflict in the individual dependently arises from the contact between the senses and sense stimuli. The inner mental conflict then spreads into the outside world or the larger society in the form of contentions, strife, disputes and wars. The Buddha also explained the origins of social unrest and even social catastrophes in terms of dependent origination. Such instances are found in the Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta and the Kutadanta Sutta of the Dighanikaya. But the most important application of the principle is for gaining insight into the workings of the inner experience of the individual. It is through that insight that one becomes enlightened and liberated. Through insight into the dependent arising of inner experience, one understands the transient nature of things. One penetrates into the conditions that create misery. One also understands that the clinging to an ego is one big mistake which results in all our conflicts and miseries.

The repeated emphasis in the Nidana Samyutta where most of the Buddha's discourses on dependent origination are collected is on the importance of the principle in avoiding extreme philosophical positions. The Buddha is once asked whether everything exists or whether everything does not exist (*sabbam atthi or sabbam natthi*). The Buddha's answer is that for the person who sees with proper insight the way in

which depending upon conditions the world arises, the view that everything does not exist would not be acceptable. Similarly for the person who sees with proper insight the way in which the world ceases to be, the view that everything exists would not be acceptable. The Buddha explains the nature of the world by taking the middle way.

According to the middle way doctrine of the Buddha there is no absolute essence to which everything in the world could be reduced. There are no eternal souls. The notions of both the macrocosmic soul as well as the microcosmic soul have been rejected. The whole universe is conceived as one gigantic activity without any actors behind it. The notion of static agents is rejected. Instead the universe is seen as empty of self-existence. Everything that exists depends on something else. There is only interdependent existence. This is an important truth which dissolves all notions of the ego. One becomes part of the network of existence. One does not have independent being. One gets absorbed into the vast network of nature. There is nothing to be owned as one's own. The attempt to cling to things as one's own only produces misery. It conditions samsara and an illusory identity which is the cause of suffering.

The Nidana Samyutta shows that there were four types of explanation offered regarding the production of things.

(1) One explanation is that they are produced by themselves (*sayam katam*). This is the theory that was accepted by the eternalists (*sassatavada*). According to them nothing new is created. Everything has eternal existence.

(2) The second theory is usually attributed to the annihilationist (*ucchedavada*). That is the theory that everything is unrelated. Everything is produced by something totally unrelated to it (*paramkatam*). There is no dependence between things. It is in terms of this view that they denied the continuity of individuated life.

The eternalists believed in a soul essence which had eternal existence. That soul was considered to be wholly separable from the body. So they believed that the body is one thing and the life principle is another (*annam jivam annam sariram*).

The annihilationist held the purely materialist position. According to them the soul is identical with the body and therefore there is no continuity of individuated life. All beings are annihilated at the

disintegration of their bodies (*kayassa bheda ucchijjanti vinassanti na honti parammarana*).

The Buddha points out that both views are wrong. The life stream is a dependently arising phenomenon. With regard to the moral responsibility for action, Buddhism denied the two extreme positions too. The eternalists believed that there is a permanent self that experiences the results of the actions that the same self performs (*so karoti so patisamvedeti*). On the other hand the annihilationist denied any relationship between action and result saying that one person acts and a totally different person experiences the result of it (*anno karoti anno patisamvedeti*).

The Buddha wanted to avoid the tendency to posit permanent agents behind the activity of nature. He shows that the question of ‘Who is it that comes into contact with sense objects? Who is it that feels? Who is it that craves?’ and so on are ill formed questions. One ought to ask ‘Depending on what does sense contact occur? Depending on what does feeling occur? Depending on what does craving occur’ and so on. This is a way of seeing the process of nature including our own personal experience as consisting of an ever flowing stream, a cosmic dynamism which need not be grasped as ‘I’ and ‘mine’. Such a manner of seeing itself liberates the mind. When the notion of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ is introduced into this interdependent flow of events we create our own suffering. The meditative awareness of the dependent origination of phenomena releases the mind from all clinging and attachment. That is the end of clinging, becoming and rebirth.

(3) The Buddha rejected the third alternative view also, which conjoined the first two. That is the view that things are both self-caused and other-caused (*sayamkattanca paramkattanca*). The Buddha did not want to see a causal situation in these terms. The very dichotomy between self and other does not exist in reality. It is a division made by imagination.

(4) The fourth alternative was the theory that things are produced by chance (*adhiccasamuppanna*). This is to deny any causal pattern in the universe. That makes all intentions futile. No one could then be in a position to exercise one’s free will for things may not happen according to our intentions.

The Buddhist theory of dependent origination avoids the tendency to explain events by hasty generalizations. Events occur depending on a multiplicity of factors. Events are neither pre-existent nor non-existent.

They are produced when a plurality of factors come together. It is by the collocation of conditions that events occur. This encourages a more realistic approach to explanation of events. It discourages the attempt to explain things by mere abstractions.

It is also important to note that the Buddhist theory of dependent origination is not an attempt to explain the first beginnings of things. It does not involve the notion of an uncaused first cause. In metaphysical theories of causation there is the notion of an uncaused first cause. But Buddhism sees the universe as a coexisting system which is dependent on numerous interdependencies. The hypothesis of God to explain the nature of existence becomes unnecessary according to the Buddhist theory. The notion of cause cannot be used to derive unverifiable metaphysical conclusions about the world. It is a notion which is legitimately applicable within the confines of experience. Buddhism attempts to explain events by describing the regular conjunction of events. It does not ask the ultimate 'Why' question which bothers the metaphysician. An explanation in terms of the relationship of regular sequence of events is the only possible way of answering the why question. To bring in a metaphysical ultimate is not necessary and is in any case unwarranted.

The Law of Dependent Origination is a profound and realistic way of understanding the universe. The fact that everything is nothing more than a set of relation is consistent with the modern scientific view of the material world. (Newton : action → reaction). Understanding the law of cause and effect or **Kamma** and its result, we must avoid from evil deeds, do good deeds and purify the mind.

According to **Paticcasamuppada**, everything has its causes. The process can be ceased if the formula is taken in reverse order. Through the complete cessation of **Avijjā**, **Sankhāra** cease. Therefore, one can be free from the round of rebirth through the eradication of **Avijja**.

PS is discussed in detail in the **Mahāpadana Sutta** and **Mahānidana Sutta** of DN. In the **Sammāditthi Sutta** MN the 12 fold factors of PS are also explained in detail. **Ven. Sāriputta** addressed to the bhikkhus that one has arrived at the true Dhamma when one understands these factors, their origin, their cessation and the way leading to the cessation. Similarly, there are many discourse on PS in the AN and the KN.