

Dependent Co-origination: The Buddhist Approach to Reality

Introduction

The Buddhist doctrine of dependent co-origination or *paticcasamuppada* (hereafter abbreviated as PS) is usually understood as strictly applicable to one's individual path of purification. Judging by the standard formulation of the teaching it is understandable that one gets this kind of impression about the teaching. In fact it is quite true to say that in the teaching of the Buddha the idea of dependent origination has been used mainly to explain how suffering arises and ceases, based on various causes and conditions, in the individual. This, however, must not be taken as the exclusive use of the explanation in Buddhism. The purpose of this essay is to show that the teaching can also be used as a way of approaching problems we are facing or forms of suffering we experience collectively in today's world.

Dependent Co-origination

'Dependent co-origination' is the literal translation of the term '*paticca samuppada*' which contains the basic Buddhist insight into the Nature and the working of reality. Although its most frequent use in the teaching is to explain how suffering arises and ceases it is understood as a principle universally applicable. The general theoretical form of the idea is presented in the discourses in the following manner:

Asmim sati idam hoti When this is, this is.

Imassa uppada idam uppajjati From the arising of this, this arises.

Asmim asati idam na hoti When this is not present, this is not present.

Imassa nirodha idam nirjhati With the cessation of this, this ceases¹.

As a universal principle it is described as having four characteristics, namely, objectivity (*tathata*), necessity (*avitathata*), invariability (*anannathata*) and conditionality (*idappaccayata*). In this characterization objectivity refers to the fact that PS is not a creation by the Buddha or by any other person. But it is there whether the Buddhas were to be born or not. What the Buddha does is to reveal it, which is already present there, to

¹ *Samyuttanikaya* II. p.28.

the world. In other words, PS is not a subjective explanation but an objective reality. This character of reality has been explained with the following simile:

Suppose a man faring through the forest, through the great woods, sees an ancient path, an ancient road traversed by men of former days. And he goes along it and sees an ancient city, a former prince's domain, where men of former days lived, a city adorned by gardens, groves, pools, foundations of walls, a beautiful spot, ... Just so did I behold an ancient path, an ancient way traversed by former Buddhas.

...Following that path, I came to understand fully decay and death, their arising, their cessation and the path leading to their cessation².

The simile indicates that PS is not an invention or a creation but a discovery of an objective reality existing in the world by the Buddha. The second characteristic describes the situation that effect necessarily occurs when the conditions are there. In the presence of all the necessary conditions the effect is bound to happen. The third says that there is a constant relation between the cause and the effect. This highlights the fact that there is a correlation between the cause and the effect. The fact that there is a group of conditions coming together to make an effect is said by the fourth. These four characteristics underscore the real law-like nature of the principle of dependent origination.

According to the discourses, the PS basically refers to the mode of explanation adopted by the Buddha to explain the origin and the cessation of suffering. The standard expression of the idea occurs in the discourses in the following manner:

And what, bhikkhus, is dependent origination? With ignorance as condition, volitional formations (come to be); with volitional formations as condition, consciousness; with consciousness as condition, name-and-form; with name-and-form as condition, the six sense bases; with the six sense bases as condition, contact; with contact as condition, feeling; with feeling as condition, craving; with craving as condition, clinging, with clinging as condition, existence, with existence as condition, birth; with birth as condition, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. This, bhikkhus, is called dependent origination.

² *Samyutanikaya* II. Pp.105-6.

But with the remainder- less fading away and cessation of ignorance comes cessation of volitional formations; with the cessation of volitional formations, ... aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure and despair cease. Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering³.

The first part of the statement explains how suffering arises dependently and the second part explains how it ceases once one link is severed. The Buddha has said in many occasions that he explains only two things, namely, arising and the cessation of suffering. What this highlights is the centrality of the phenomenon of suffering in the teaching of the Buddha. It does not mean, however, that he has not said anything else. What it means is that whatever he has said would not contradict this broad theme and that the eradication of suffering has been his foremost concern.

Although suffering in this context is basically understood as individual suffering Buddhism has always understood individual essentially as a part of a society. Society ultimately being a combination of different configurations of human beings, social problems are nothing other than human problems in which each individual player may not be considered very important. Buddhism understands various forms of social unrest and upheavals as manifestations of human suffering affecting, ultimately, individual human beings.

By explaining the origin of suffering as dependently originated, the Buddha, first and foremost, dissociated himself from the two religious trends popular during his time, namely, eternalism (*sassata-vada*), the view that human being lasts for ever in some form or other, and annihilationism (*uccheda-vada*), the view that human being does not survive death but is totally annihilated. Avoiding these two extremes, the Buddha describes the human predicament as originated dependent on various causes and conditions which are interconnected. As has been explained by the Buddha to the ascetic named Acela Kassapa⁴, this way of explanation avoids the following erroneous views:

Suffering is done by oneself.

³ *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Bhikkhu Bodhi, vol.I. Wisdom Publications, Boston. 2000. pp.533-4.

⁴ *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*. vol. I pp.545-548.

Suffering is done by another.

Suffering is done by both oneself and another

Suffering occurs for no reason and is accidental.

Suffering does not exist.

According to the explanation given subsequently, the first view amounts to eternalism; the second to annihilationism; the third is a combination of the two wrong views and the fourth is a denial of causation characterized, according to Buddhist understanding, by conditionality. That the rejection of these erroneous views does not amount to rejecting the existence of suffering is indicated by the denial of the last position.

The implications of this explanation cannot be over-estimated. By rejecting the first two positions Buddhism rejects not only metaphysical explanations but also it rejects, perhaps more importantly, any explanation of absolutist nature. A view that suffering is created by one's own self attributes the origin of suffering to a metaphysical cause, soul believed last for ever, in this context, which at the same time is one single and absolute cause. The key point in the teaching of PS is that reality is an inter-dependent and inter-related complex of events. According to this understanding there cannot be any unconnected phenomenon in reality; no phenomenon can stand on its own.

The dependent and inter-connected nature of reality is not something invented or created by the Buddha. As the Buddha himself has claimed "whether the Buddhas were to exist or to not exist this nature of reality is there, namely, the conditionality⁵". The role of the Buddha in this context is nothing but that of a guide who has a pioneering experience. What this means, in other words, is that PS represents an intrinsic character of reality, which we need to comprehend for the sake of right understanding.

In speaking of understanding reality, we cannot forget that human being is a very important and decisive aspect of it. It is very important therefore that the nature and his relation to reality are understood as essential aspects of dependent origination. Unlike in Brahmana tradition where human being is understood in terms of his individual soul and

⁵ *Samyuttanikaya* II. P.25.

its relation to the universal soul, which is understood as the Creator God, Buddhism understands human being as a dynamic interaction of five khandhas or aggregates, namely, material form, feeling, perception, constructions and consciousness. These five are not static entities but are processes that undergo constant change. In other words, this means that human being is not a permanent or an absolute entity but a dynamic and causally conditioned phenomenon.

In this manner both reality and human being are causally conditioned phenomena and are subject to the same characteristics of existence. In Buddhism, these characteristics are described as 'ti-lakkhana' or three signata, namely, impermanence (anicca), unsatisfactoriness (dukkha) and non-substantiality (anatta). Impermanence refers to the ever-present nature of change in reality in which human being is an essential part. Nothing in the world or in human being remains unchanged. It is the cause of the unsatisfactory feeling experienced by all beings and it is what is called 'suffering'. What is changing and unsatisfactory is characterized as 'no-soul'. The idea of no-soul in Buddhism basically means that human being is not characterized by a soul believed to survive his death and last for ever (till it attains the union with Brahman). Experientially this means that there is nothing that we can grasp within or without oneself as 'it is me' and 'it is mine'. A well-known statement in Buddhism says that 'all conditioned phenomena are impermanent' (sabbe sankhara anicca⁶). The term 'sankhara' in this context has a very broad meaning encompassing in it reality in its totality. This indicates that everything, animate and inanimate, share certain fundamental characteristics.

There are certain significant ethical implications in this position. The position of human being in nature is an area religions do not see eye-to-eye. The Buddhist position holds that to be born as a human being is precious. This is mainly because human being has a capacity to determine his own destiny.

Everything from simple events in human life to more complicated events is explained in Buddhism as caused by factors within human experience. For instance, in the Hindu

⁶ Dhammapada ?

tradition the act of perception is usually described with reference to one's soul.

Accordingly it is said that it is one's soul that really sees or hears things but not one's eye or ear. The contrary explanation of Buddhism runs in the following manner:

Dependent on the eye, and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the above three is contact. With contact as condition there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a man with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye⁷. (The same applies to the rest of the sensory faculties).

In this account there is no reference to a soul understood as the 'ghost in the machine'! The discourse describes how the process of perception takes place, and based on that it describes, subsequently, how suffering arises due to wrong attitude to one's perceptions.

Social manifestation of human suffering has been dealt with in the same manner. For instance, the Cakkavatti-Sihanada sutta describes how deterioration in society takes place in a causally conditioned manner:

From the not giving of property to the needy, poverty became rife, from the growth of poverty, the taking of what was not given increased, from the increase of theft, the use of weapons increased, from the increase use of weapons, the taking of life increased, and from the increase in the taking of life, people's life-span decreased...⁸

Human being and his multiform suffering is also a part of this.

The Buddhist view of human being the resultant attitude are basically in conformity with the understanding of reality as dependently originated. In a dependently arisen reality there is no place for a transcendent reality staying over and above what is ordinary. This rules out the possibility that human being is a creation by such transcendent reality representing itself in a manner. The classical Hindu view holds that each individual human being has an atma which determines one's uniqueness (jiva-atma). All individual

⁷ *The Middle Length discourses of the Buddha*, Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Buddhist Publication Society, 1995. p.203.

⁸ *Thus Have I Heard*, Maurice Walshe, Wisdom Publications London, 1987. pp.399-400.

atmas owe their existence to what is called 'parama-atma' or absolute reality which is sometimes understood as a personal God. In this understanding of reality human being and everything else associated with him have been created by God and are capable, in principle, of existing independently. In the Buddhist understanding marked by PS human being too is dependently originated and hence a part of the overall reality which constitutes one's lived experience.

By characterizing human being in this manner Buddhism does not say that he is nothing more than any other aspect of reality. On the contrary, Buddhism holds that to be born as a human being is a rare opportunity and that human life is something of great value. What this basically means is that human being, of all beings, has the capacity for shaping one's own destiny. This view is based on human being's developed physical and psychological aspects with potentiality for attaining higher states of development. Human being, on the other hand, shares many characteristics with all the other animate and inanimate beings and objects. For instance, like all beings, he is subject to the natural and moral laws; and subject to impermanence, sorrowfulness and non-substantiality. Like all beings, he is desirous of pleasure and happiness and works for that end all through his existence and finally succumbs to death like all beings. The morality of all this is that human beings is no extra-ordinary and part and parcel of nature as a whole.

The above analysis of reality based on PS has a very significant ethical lesson in it. A very powerful religious expression of this lesson is included in the story of Ratthapala, a young and rich householder who renounced his worldly life on seeing the reality of life. On being questioned by the ruler of his country Ratthapala explains the reasons behind his act of renunciation:

Great king, there are four characteristics of Nature that have been taught by the Blessed one who knows and sees: Life is unstable, it is swept away; the world has no shelter and is without an overlord; the world has nothing of its own, one has to leave everything and pass on; and the world is incomplete, insatiate and the slave of craving⁹.

⁹ Ratthapala sutta, *Majjhimanikaya* (82).

Of the four characteristics described by Ratthapala, the first three are basically natural results of reality characterized by dependent existence. The fourth is how an uninstructed worldling would react to such reality. The aim of the teaching of the Buddha is to guide one to develop healthy attitude towards reality. There is no wonder in the dependently arisen phenomena being impermanent. Everything including various situations involving human beings is subject to change. The ethics deriving from this understanding of reality may well be called 'ethics of impermanence'. Religiously, it reminds us that we as human beings are only a part of a wider reality, sharing lot of characteristics together. It not only makes us humble but also it puts us in the right perspective.

As a part of our lived experience dependency and impermanence may give some of us a negative sense of life. This, however, is to take these universal phenomena in a wrong manner. Impermanence also gives us hope: hope for the change for better. As Nagarjuna demonstrated forcefully, a reality characterized by the presence of 'one's own nature' (sva-bhava) is a reality that will never change. This means that there will not be progress (or lack of it) in religious life for progress involves change for better. Nagarjuna says:

When sva-bhava exists the universe will be unborn, non-ceased, remaining immutable and devoid of variegated states.

If empty is not seen then reaching what has not been reached, the act of terminating suffering as well as the relinquishing of all defilements also will not be seen (XXIV: 38-39).

The changing and dependent character of reality, in this manner, provides the basis for quest for solutions to problems with which we are entangled.

The Buddhist tradition refers to five areas of reality that come under the operation of PS. They are given in the following manner:

- i. The physical (inorganic) world (*utuniyama*)
- ii. The physical (organic) world (*bijaniyama*)
- iii. The sphere of mental activity (*cittaniyama*)
- iv. The moral sphere of moral action (*kammaniyama*)

v. The sphere of higher spiritual life (*dhammaniyama*)¹⁰

In this context, 'niyama' refers to the nature of things or to natural principles. The first category is the inorganic aspect of nature such as changes in seasons. The second refers to the organic aspect of Nature such as plant life. Both aspects of Nature function as causally conditioned phenomena. This means that there is no doer or regulator within or behind these phenomena. The third is the sphere of mind, which, very often, is misunderstood to be the agent in the person or his soul. Moral or immoral action, covered by the fourth aspect, too is very often understood as done by oneself or another. By including under this classification the mysterious agent has been taken away from the moral action. The last refers to the spiritual sphere and underscores the fact that it too has to be understood as an interdependent web of conditions. In other words, this classification shows that, according to Buddhism, Nature, with its all aspects including human beings, is considered to a phenomenon governed by one universal principle, namely, dependent arising, co-existence and dissolution. As is clear from the *Aggannasutta* of the *Dighanikaya*, the Buddha explains the evolution of the world and the people and their institutions in accordance with this theory. As a result, it does not talk of a first cause which causes everything else. In the like manner, as we saw earlier, the Buddha has explained how problems in society arise as causally conditioned phenomena.

Conclusion

I think, ultimately, the characterization of reality in this manner has a very important message for the modern world which has an increasing tendency to perceive itself (one's organization, society or country or one's own self) as the 'centre of the universe'. In a dependently arisen phenomenon there cannot be any center as such occupying the supreme position. One's existence is dependent on others as much as that of the others' is dependent on oneself. This means that we cannot solve our own problems by forgetting totally those of others. In trying to do so either we solve our problems inadequately; or we create fresh problems for ourselves and others or both. We cannot really ignore others' problems for, in the final analysis, there is no such thing as 'others' problems' to which one is totally immune. 'The other' in this context is not merely the human beings

¹⁰ *Sumangalavilasini* II. p.432.

but it means the animal life as well as inanimate aspects of nature such as trees and plants, rivers and mountains, oceans and environment. I must underscore the fact that this is not reading modern environmental attitudes into Buddhism; the Buddhist tradition has always upheld an all-inclusive attitude toward Nature as exemplified by such statements as ‘*sabba-pana-bhuta hitanukampi viharati*’ (one lives being kind and understanding to all forms of life and beings)¹¹ and ‘*sabbe satta bhavantu sukhitatta*’¹² (may all beings be well and happy).

It is true that we are speaking of ‘environmental factor’ today much more than we did several decades ago. But still it is difficult to say that we have learnt the lesson. For instance, what most of the developed countries do is to find places elsewhere in other countries, very often within less developed countries, which cannot afford the luxury of caring for nature to carry out their hazardous research or dump their dangerous waste materials. Driven by poverty most of these less developed countries do not find an alternative to letting themselves becoming the garbage dumps of their more developed counterparts. By behaving in this manner the capable countries are only passing their problem to someone else. But this is quite a temporary measure. The dependently arisen character highlighted by PS shows that none is immune to the problems that others face. One cannot do harm to someone else without causing harm to oneself in the process. Therefore this insight should provide us with an opportunity and a need to be generous and also to adopt a broader perspective of life in which both oneself and the other are included in a meaningful manner.

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¹¹ Samannaphalasutta- *Dighanikaya*.

¹² Karaniyamettasutta-*Suttanipata*.