

**BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY**  
**LECTURE-2**  
**THE DOCTRINE OF PRATITYASAMUTPADA**

**By**

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The doctrine of Pratityasamutpada (dependent Origination) a fundamental Buddhist teaching on causation and the ontological status of phenomena. The doctrine teaches that all phenomena arise in dependence on causes and conditions and lack intrinsic being. The doctrine is expressed in its simplest form in the phrase 'idam sati ayam bhavati' (Skt., when this exists, that arises), which can be expressed in the logical form  $A \rightarrow B$  (when condition A exists, effect B arises), or as its negation  $\neg A \rightarrow \neg B$  (where condition A does not exist, effect B does not arise). The important corollary of this teaching is that there is nothing that comes into being through its own power or volition, and there are therefore no entities or metaphysical realities such as God or a soul, (atman) that transcend the causal nexus. In this respect the doctrine dovetails with the teaching of no self (anatman). Early sources indicate that the Buddha became enlightened under the Bodhi Tree when he fully realized the profound truth of Dependent Origination, namely that all phenomena are conditioned (samskrta) and arise and cease in a determinate series.

The doctrine of Pratityasamutpada (Dependent Origination) is the foundation of all the teachings of the Buddha. It is contained in the Second Noble Truth which gives us the cause of suffering, and in the Third Noble Truth which shows the cessation of suffering. Suffering is Samsara; cessation of suffering is Nirvana. Both

are only aspects of the same Reality. Pratityasamutpada, viewed from the point of view of relativity it is Samsara; while viewed from the point of view of reality, it is Nirvana.<sup>1</sup> It is relativity and dependent causation as well as the Absolute, for it is the Absolute itself which appears as relative and acts as the binding thread giving them unity and meaning. Pratityasamutpada tells us that in the empirical world dominated by the intellect everything is relative, conditional, dependent, subject to birth and death and therefore impermanent. The causal formula is: 'This being, that arises'<sup>2</sup>, i.e., 'Depending on the cause, the effect arises.' Thus every object of thought is necessarily relative. And because it is relative, it is neither absolutely real (for it is subject to death) nor absolutely unreal (for it appears to arise). All phenomenal things hang between reality and nothingness, avoiding both the extremes. They are like the appearances of the Vedantic Avidya or Maya. It is in this sense that Buddha calls the doctrine the Middle Path, *Madhyama Pratipat*, which avoids both eternalism and nihilism. Buddha identifies it with the Bodhi, the Enlightenment which dawned upon him under the shade of the bo tree in Gaya and which transformed the mortal Siddhartha into the immortal Buddha. He also identifies it with the Dharma, the Law: 'He who sees the Pratityasamutpada sees the Dharma, and he who sees the Dharma sees the Pratityasamutpada.' Failure to grasp it is the cause of misery. Its knowledge leads to the cessation of misery. Nagarjuna salutes Buddha as the best among the teachers, who taught the blessed doctrine of Pratityasamutpada which leads to the cessation of plurality and to bliss.<sup>3</sup> Shantaraksita also does the same.<sup>4</sup>

Troubled by the sight of disease, old age and death, Buddha left his home to find a solution of the misery of earthly life. Pratityasamutpada is the solution which he found. Why do we suffer misery and pain? Why do we suffer old age and death? Because we are born. Why are we born? Because there is a will to be born. Why

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<sup>1</sup> Madhyamika-Karika

<sup>2</sup> asmin sati , idam bhavati

<sup>3</sup> Madhyamika- Karika Opening verse

<sup>4</sup> Tattvasangraha, Opening verse

should there be this will to become? Because we cling to the objects of the world. Why do we have this clinging? Because we crave to enjoy the objects of this world. Why do we have this craving, this thirst for enjoyment? Because of sense-experience. Why do we have this sense-experience? Because of sense-object-contact. Why do we have this contact? Because of the six sense-organs (the sixth sense being the mind). Why do we have the six sense-organs? Because of the psycho-physical organism. Why do we have this organism? Because of the initial consciousness of the embryo. Why do we have this consciousness? Because of our predispositions or impressions of Karma. Why do we have these impressions? Because of Ignorance. Hence Ignorance is the root-cause of all suffering

Thus we get the twelve links of the Causal Wheel of Dependent Origination:

- (1) Ignorance (avidya).
- (2) Impressions of karmic forces (samskara).
- (3) Initial consciousness of the embryo (vijnana).
- (4) Psycho-physical organism (nama-rupa).
- (5) Six sense-organs including mind (sadayatana).
- (6) Sense-object-contact (sparsha).
- (7) Sense-experience (vedana).
- (8) Thirst for sense-enjoyment (trsna).
- (9) Clinging to this enjoyment (upadana).
- (10) Will to be born (bhava).
- ( 11 ) Birth or rebirth (jati).
- (12) Old age and death (jara-marana).

Out of these twelve links the first two are rejected to past life, the last two to future life and the rest to present life.

The first factor in this series is avidya, or ignorance. The false sense of 'I' is the central support of individual being. It is the bearer of karma as well as its breeder. Individuality is the product of avidya and karma, even as the flame is the fiery spark

as well as the fuel that feeds it. Avidya hides the nature of life, which is sorrow. The stress on ignorance is nothing peculiar to Buddhism. 'Things are what they are,' as Bishop Butler says, 'and the consequences of them will be what they will be; why then should we desire to be deceived?' Yet we do deceive ourselves every day. Buddha asks us to face facts, know what they are and mean. It is ignorance consisting in assuming as real what is not, that produces the craving for life. It impels us to live and enjoy the world. The lust for Life is considered by Buddha to be ignoble, stupid, moral bondage, one of the four mental intoxicants. If man is to be relieved from the misery of mundane existence, the false desire should be rooted out and the rage to life suppressed. Ignorance in early Buddhism is the cause of egoism, or the I-sense. It makes the individual feel himself to be separate from the rest of existence, unrelated to the order of the world. We cling to our little self, struggle hard to perpetuate it, and continue it through all eternity. Individual existence is an evil, desire is the outer expression of it. Men are unhappy simply because they are alive. The source of all sorrow is the affirmation of life. The force of ignorance is so great that in spite of the worst suffering men display a tenacious clinging to life.

The second link in the chain is samskaras. The word samskara comes from a root which means to prepare or arrange. It stands for the product as well as for the process of making. It suggests how all things that are made have existence only in the making, how all being is becoming. Samskara is translated 'synthesis' or 'conformation.' It also means action, pure and impure, action possessing merit to be rewarded or guilt to be punished, here or hereafter. In the wide sense of the term it means the will force or the spirit energy which determines the new existence. In the Majjhima Nikaya we read: 'It happens, my disciples, that a monk, endowed with faith, endowed with righteousness, endowed with knowledge of the doctrine, with resignation, with wisdom, communes thus with himself: 'Now then could I, when my body is dissolved in death, obtain rebirth in a powerful princely family.' He thinks

this thought, dwells on this thought, cherishes this thought. These sarhskaras and internal conditions which he has thus cherished within him and fostered lead to his rebirth in such an existence. This, disciples, is the avenue, this the path which leads to rebirth in such an existence.' The train of thought is repeated with reference to the several classes of men and gods until its application is made to the highest condition of nirvana. The samskara may also be for the abolition of all samskaras or the gaining of wisdom and deliverance.

In the causal nexus the third item is consciousness, from which name and form arise. 'If consciousness, Ananda, did not enter into the womb, would name and form arise in the womb?' No, sir." And if consciousness, Ananda, after it has entered into the womb were again to leave its place, would name and form be born into this life?" No, sir.' And if consciousness, Ananda, were again lost to the boy or to the girl while they were yet small, would name and form attain growth, increase and progress?" No, sir.<sup>5</sup> At death, while the other elements, body, feelings, perceptions vanish, vijñana or consciousness persists, as the connecting link between the old and the new. Only when we attain nirvana or deliverance does it completely disappear. It is the element of consciousness which becomes the germ of the new being when the old being dies. This germ seeks in the womb the material stuff from which a new state of being is formed. If consciousness does not find the necessary material structure, it cannot develop. 'If, Ananda, consciousness were not to find name and material form as its resting-place, would then birth, old age and death, the origin and development of sorrow, reveal themselves in succession?' No, sir, they would not.<sup>6</sup>

The world of objects stands opposed to the conscious subject. If there is no subject, there is no object. As we have seen, the activity of the six senses depends on the world which arises from the impressions produced when the senses come into

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<sup>5</sup> Mahanidana Sutta

<sup>6</sup> Mahapadana Sutta and Samyutta Nikaya,

touch with objects. The rise of impressions constitutes birth, their cessation, death. The two, consciousness and name and form, are inter-dependent. From them the six fields, eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and manas or mind, arise. Thence are developed the organs necessary for communication with the external world and the objects of the world, forms, sounds, colours, tastes, tangibility and thoughts. Thoughts are said to exist objectively confronting manas or mind, even as visible bodies exist before the eyes. Sometimes it is said that the eye is the product of seeing, the ear of hearing.

From feeling arises tanha or thirst or longing, which leads us from birth to birth. It is the potent cause of life and suffering. We are because we thirst for being. We suffer because we thirst for pleasure; 'Whomsoever thirst holds in subjection that thirst, that contemptible thing which pours its venom through the world, his suffering grows as the grass grows. Whosoever holds it in subjection.... suffering falls off from him as the water drops from the lotus flowers.'<sup>7</sup> 'As, if the root be uninjured, even as a hewn tree grows up anew mightily, so, if the excitement of thirst be not wholly dead, suffering ever and anon breaks out again.'<sup>8</sup> Tanha or thirst in its threefold form is the cause of all suffering.<sup>9</sup>

From thirst comes clinging or upadana. The flame of thirst clings to the fuel of upadana. Wherever it may go the flame has the fuel clinging to it. Deliverance is the extinction of thirst, and bondage is clinging to things. Only by the cessation of clinging can the soul be delivered from sinful existence.

From clinging to existence comes becoming or bhava, which Candrakirti interprets as the karma which brings about rebirth<sup>10</sup>. from becoming comes birth, from birth come old age and death, pain and lamentation, sorrow, anxiety and despair.

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<sup>7</sup> Dhammapada

<sup>8</sup> Dhammapada

<sup>9</sup> See Mahavagga,i, 1,2

<sup>10</sup> Punarbhavajanakam karma. Madhyamika Vrtti.

The whole scheme seems dogmatic. It aims at showing that vijnana, or consciousness of 'I', does not reside in an eternal soul, but is a continuous phenomenon arising by way of cause and effect. It elaborates the answer contained in the second and third truths of the origin and the extinction of suffering. The vanity of all existence should be understood before the pain of existence can be abolished. The individuality to which we cling is only a form, an empty appearance occasioned by ignorance, the first and the root cause. The persistence of ignorance is indicated by the persistence of individuality. It is not a question of the individual manufacturing sorrow; he is himself a form of sorrow. The sense of 'I' which generates the illusion is itself an illusion. Individuality is the symptom as well as the disease. According to the Upanisads the life history of the individual is continued so long as there is ignorance in the understanding and leanness in the soul. In the *Thieologia Germanica* it is stated: 'Nothing burneth in hell but self-will,' and this self-will is avidya actualising itself. It is the cause as well as the product, the deceiver as well as the deceived. Ignorance and individuality are mutually dependent. Individuality means limitation, and limitation means ignorance. Ignorance can cease only with the cessation of the possibility of ignorance, namely, individuality. The whole world is a prey to ignorance, and so it suffers. From the monarch to the mendicant, from the creeping thing of earth to the shining deva of heaven, everything suffers. 'There are five things which no samana and no Brahmana and no god, neither Mara, nor Brahma, nor any being in the universe can bring about: that what is subject to sickness should not be sick, that what is subject to death should not die, that what is subject to decay should not decay, that what is liable to pass away should not pass away'<sup>11</sup>. Individuality born of avidya is the crux of all life, the original sin of all existence.

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<sup>11</sup> Anguttara Nikaya

The whole scheme rests on avidya, but we are not told how exactly this avidya arises. The beginning of the circuit is not apparent. We cannot find its cause. It seems to be a blind end or an incomprehensible reality which we must accept unthinkingly. To Buddha everything that lives, moves and displays individual existence does so through the power of avidya. Its presence is attested by the fact of existence. When we see a swinging pendulum we infer that it must have received a push. We infer avidya to be the antecedent condition of all existence. There is nothing prior to it, for the process of the world is beginningless. Buddha seems to assert the eternity of ignorance. In the chain of causation it is put first, for through it comes willing and through willing existence. When we ask what is it of which we are ignorant, early Buddhism says we are ignorant of the true nature of 'I' and of the four noble truths. The cause of existence is a pre-existence like the present, where knowledge of the four sacred truths was not acquired. In the Upanisads the cause of all suffering is traced to the avidya, pertaining to the fundamental identity of the ego with the soul of the world, which leads to egoity. In both, egoity is the result of avidya, in both it is the non-possession of the saving knowledge that hides from us the truth.

Buddha recognises that ignorance is nothing absolute. It comes into play that it may abolish itself. The metaphysical problem of the rise of ignorance seems to be evaded. We cannot account for it. We cannot say it is real, for it can be sublated. Nor is it unreal, for in that case it could not produce anything. But Buddhism does not consider avidya to be a cause by courtesy. It is really the source of all existence. Perhaps the Upanisad theory is truer. The manifold world has the power of concealing reality at the same time that it manifests it. This power is the central force, the non-being, which pushes reality into outward manifestation. This explanation is not possible until we explicitly posit a central reality. so long as such a central being is not admitted, the nature of avidya and its origin will remain unsolved. But everything in Buddhism is favourable to the Upanisad hypothesis. Avidya is not



absolutely useless. It provides room for the possibility of deliverance from itself. If nirvana is more than extinction, the truth more than a mere passing shadow, then individuality is not absolute non-being, but a mixture of being and non-being, and avidya is not falsehood so much as lack of knowledge. When it is abolished truth remains. Later Buddhist writers like Asvaghosa speak of an abrupt upheaval of avidya out of the Tathata, the sudden rise of the individual will out of the universal. Vasubandhu explains the individuals as the imperfect reflections of the one universal mind. Avidya, then, is the sakti or the force of the absolute which brings about the procession of individual existences from out of the universal. It is the principle of negativity at the very heart of reality. Behind it our finite intellect cannot penetrate. Buddhistic metaphysics becomes satisfactory and intelligible only if it is completed by some form of absolute idealism.

**Conclusion:**

The doctrine of Pratityasamutpada (Dependent Origination) is the central teaching of the Buddha and his other teachings can be easily deduced from it as corollaries. The theory of Karma is based on this, being an implication of the law of causation. Our present life is due to the impressions of the Karmas of the past life and it will shape our future life. Ignorance and Karma go on determining each other in a vicious circle. Again, the theory of Momentariness (ksana-bhaiiga-vada) is also a corollary of Pratityasamutpad (Dependent Origination). Because things depend on their causes and conditions, because things are relative, dependent, conditional and finite, they must be momentary. To say that a thing arises depending on its cause is to admit that it is momentary, for when the cause is removed the thing will cease to be. That which arises, that which is born, that which is produced, must necessarily be subject to death and destruction. And that which is subject to death and destruction is not permanent. And that which is not permanent is momentary. The theory of No-Ego (nairatmyavada), the theory that the individual ego is ultimately

false is also based on this doctrine. When everything is momentary, the ego is also momentary and therefore relative and false. The theory that the so-called matter is unreal, that there is no material substance (sarighatavada) is also derived from this doctrine. Matter, being momentary, is relative and therefore ultimately unreal. The theory of causal efficiency (artha-kriya-karitva) is also based on it, because each preceding link is causally efficient to produce the succeeding link and thus the capacity to produce an effect becomes the criterion of existence.

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