

Pratītyasamutpāda: Universal Ontological Principle of Reality

The doctrine of *Pratītyasamutpāda* often interpreted as dependent arising is a unique and significant part of Buddhist metaphysics. The doctrine teaches that all phenomena (world of becoming) arise together in a mutually interdependence web of causes (*hetu*) and conditions (*pratyaya*). This doctrine has two interconnected purposes: (a) On the positive side, the doctrine is aimed at outlining the nature, structure, and constitution of things and the world they inhabit, and (b) on the negative side, it abandons the search for ultimate objectivity of reality, that is, the erroneous search for the metaphysical principle like permanent self in that that inherently is impermanent and dependently arising. Moreover, this doctrine is a two-sided principle, the first side of which is this causal principle that literally states that every phenomenon is dependently arisen and the second side is the semantic principle that the very meaning of the term/concept is constituted by its place in a web of other concepts and beliefs. That is, the concept or judgment derives its meaning in relation to another concept or judgment. But this leads to the following pertinent questions: How do things arise, or how, in the first place the world has arisen? Or what would be the nature of reality, whether it is other-caused or self-caused? To answer these questions and to focus on how this doctrine is used in various Buddhists contents and discourses, there is a need to have a deeper

understanding of this doctrine. Therefore, I propose to focus on the significance of this doctrine, not only in explaining the nature of reality (causal principle), but also showing its importance in semantics. In order to show this, my procedure will be twofold; first, I shall scrutinize the background problem, which leads to the origin of the doctrine of *Pratītyasamutpāda*, and second, I shall discuss the two-sided principle of *Pratītyasamutpāda*.

The Background of the Doctrine

It is natural for any religious movement to concern itself with the problem of the origin of the world, i.e., how things arise, or how, in the first place, the world has arisen? Major global religious tradition holds the belief that a creator God (*Īśvara* or *Brahmā*) is the first cause of the universe and the ultimate origin of life. But, Buddhists deny both the external causation (God) and the internal causation (self). That is, phenomena are neither other-caused nor self-caused. They are not ready to subscribe to any metaphysical causation as an explanation for the origin of phenomena such as, Brahmanical notion of self (*ātman*), the materialist theory of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) and even the Jaina theory of action (*kriyā*). Instead of affirming or rejecting any extreme point of view between externalism (*śāśvatavāda*) and annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*) concerning the permanent existence and non-existence, the Buddha upheld the middle position (*madhyamā pratipad*) in terms of his doctrine of *Pratītyasamutpāda*.¹

Nature and Meaning of *Pratītyasamutpāda*

According to the Buddha, the change in all phenomena is not random or accidental, but it is governed by a causal law, known as *Pratītyasamutpāda*. According to this doctrine, the arising of entities occurs due to the mutual dependence of causes and conditions. Whatever entity there be, it comes into being in dependence upon the various causes and conditions. There is, thus no entity that is self-existent, that is, the cause of itself. It means that entities, having arisen dependently, are conditioned, and so subject to change which constant fluxional becoming occasions. This changing aspect of the dependently arisen entities is reflected in their mutability, impermanence and nonsubstantiality. Moreover, the realization of this truth of *Pratītyasamutpāda* (conditioned arising of existence, things, and events in general) constitutes the contents of the Buddha's Awakening (Enlightenment or *bodhi*). That's why the Buddha says: 'He who sees the principle of conditioned arising sees the *dhamma* and he who sees the *dhamma* sees the principle of conditioned arising.'²

Furthermore, this doctrine is said to have four main characteristics, namely: (i) Objectivity (*tathatā*), (ii) necessity (*avitathatā*), (iii) invariability (*anaññathatā*), and (iv) conditionality or interdependence (*idappaccayatā*).³

According to the Buddha, this doctrine is not merely an idea or thought-construction without any objective validity or ontological status as Upanisadic and Brahmanical thinkers considered, but it is an idea that corresponds to what is found in nature i.e., truth or ultimate reality. In this way, the first characteristics, objectivity (*tathatā*) describes the ontological status of *Pratītyasamutpāda* in Buddhism. The second characteristic of

necessity is taken in the sense of lack of exception or the existence of regularity and not in the sense of uniqueness or constancy as considered by the early Buddhist.⁴ The third characteristic of invariability should be taken in the sense of constancy of relation between the causes and effects rather than the sameness of the causes and effects.⁵ The last and most important of the four characteristic, namely conditionality or interdependence was used as a synonym for *Pratītyasamutpāda* by the early Buddhists. Moreover, it avoids *Pratītyasamutpāda* from two extremes forms, fatalism (*niyatīvāda*) and accidentalism (*yaḍṛcchāvāda*), so it may be called the middle path.⁶ Further, this interdependence is explained in an elaborated form through a causal formula as:

When this (cause) is present, that (effect) comes to be;
and on the arising of this (cause), that (effect) arises.

When this (cause) is absent, that (effect) does not come to be;
and on the cessation of this (cause), that (effect) ceases.⁷

Or again:

X causes Y

When X is present, so is Y

When X is absent, so is Y

When X ceases, so shall Y

The first half of the causal formula: When this exist ...that arises, refers to origination aspect of the doctrine (positive aspect) and moreover, the characteristic of necessity and invariability is also expressed through this aspect. And the second half: When this does not exist....that ceases, refers to the cessation aspect (negative aspect) and the characteristic of conditionality is emphasized by this aspect. The importance of this is that

the doctrine of *Pratītyasamutpāda* is not only a theory of origination (arising), but it is also a theory of cessation.

Application of Causal formula

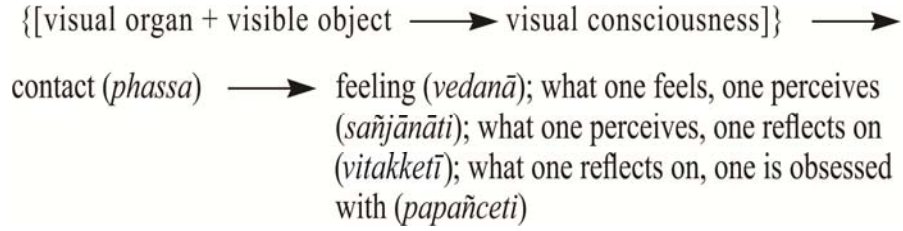
The general formulation of causation has two well-known applications, one to the Buddhist conception of suffering, known as the Four Noble Truths, and the other to that of rebirth process, known as the Twelve Fold formula or Twelve-linked chain. Of the Four Noble Truth, namely: (1) There is suffering, (2) There is a cause of suffering, (3) There is a cessation of suffering, and (4) The way to end suffering (through the practice of Eightfold Path), only the second and third truths refer to the theory of causation. And in the second application of Twelve-links of conditioned existence, each link is conditioned by the preceding one, and itself conditions the succeeding one. It is said that from ignorance (*avijjā*) springs the mental formations (*saṃkhārā*), from the mental formation springs the consciousness (*viññāna*), from consciousness springs name and form (*nāma-rūpa*), from name and form springs the six senses (*sadāyatana*), from six senses springs contact (*phassa*), from contact springs sensation (*vedanā*), from sensation springs craving (*taṇhā*), from craving springs clinging (*upādāna*), from clinging springs becoming (*bhāva*), from becoming springs birth (*jāti*), from birth springs old age and death (*jarāmaraṇa*).⁸ Moreover, these cover three lives, former life, current life, and future life. In this manner it explained the entire process of arising, which is also known as *Bhavacakra* (wheel of life). Opposite to arising is cessation which runs like this: With the cessation of ignorance, there is the cessation of mental formations, there is the cessation of consciousness, till the series reaches to

the point where birth ceases to be. With the cessation of birth comes to stoppage of the entire process of old age and death, which ultimately culminates in the cessation of this entire mass of suffering.⁹ Thus, the doctrine is used in such a manner as would explain both the process of arising of phenomena as well as their cessation. Ignorance, however, should not be seen as providing the initial momentum to the process of arising and ceasing because of it being circular. It is the mutual dependence and dissolution of all the items in the series that result in arising and ceasing of phenomenal becoming.

Furthermore, this means that the implication of *Pratītyasamutpāda* can be confidently applied in any situations and at any level. Later thinkers refer to five broad spheres in which the causal process works, known as ‘Five *Niyāmas*’, namely: (i) *Utuniyāma*, (ii) *bījaniyāma*, (iii) *cittaniyāma*, (iv) *kammaniyāma*, and (v) *dhammaniyāma*.¹⁰ *Utuniyāma* (physical causation) - *utu* means non-living matter. That is, showing causation in cosmic world by denying the first cause of the world as God and adopting a middle path (between two extremes of eternalism and nihilism) of becoming, as already explained above. *Bījaniyāma* (causation of human personality) - *bīja* means seed, so it deals with the world of living matter. According to the Buddha, even at the individual level, the doctrine of *Pratītyasamutpāda* operates, as already discussed at great length in the chapter of the three marks of existence, in the context of the second mark, i.e., *anātman* (no-soul or non-substantiality). *Cittaniyāma* (causation of the perceptual process) - *citta* means mind, so *cittaniyāma* is conditionality as operative in the world of mind. That is, the sphere of thought or mental

events. The existence of this third *niyāma*, therefore, implies that mental activity and development are not haphazard, but governed by laws.

It is important that we understand what this means, as the Buddha realized that a proper understanding of the sensory process would give insight into the origin of suffering as well as into the way one can attain freedom from suffering.¹¹ The theory of sense-perception is represented in the twelvefold formula of causation¹² as follows:-



This is the process of sense-perception. But the point to be noted is that, causal law operates up to the point of feeling or sensation, immediately after it, the process of perception becomes one between subject and object. We stop at this point and we will take this process of sense-perception again in the 5th chapter on ‘The Development of the Theory of Perception in Abhidharma and Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda Tradition’.

Thus, in this way, the process of perception, which the Upanisadic thinkers also explained on the basis of a metaphysical self, received a causal explanation in the hands of the Buddha. *Kammaniyāma* (causation of moral behavior and social phenomena) - *Kamma* (*Pali*) is of course more popularly known in its Sanskrit form, *karma*, and it means action, but in the sense of deliberately willed action. So it is traditionally and paradoxically said sometimes that *karma* is equivalent to *cetanā* (volition). As soon as volition arises, one does the action, whether by body, speech, or mind. What

it really means is that good karma naturally results in happiness, and bad karma naturally results in misery, i.e. law administers itself. From the Buddhist point of view, the universe functions according to conditionality, and this operates at the karmic level in a way which we could describe as ethical, in that it conserves ethical values. This is *kammaniyāma*. *Dhammaniyāma* (causation of spiritual phenomena) is the fifth and last *niyāma*. *Dhamma*, which is a word with a number of different possible applications, here means simply spiritual or transcendental as opposed to mundane. So the principle of conditionality operates on this level too. The first four *niyāmas* are all types of conditionality in the cyclical sense, in the sense of action and reaction between pairs of opposites. But *dhammaniyāma* corresponds to the spiral type of conditionality. As such it constitutes the sum total of the spiritual laws which govern progress through the stages of the Buddhist path. Thus, we conclude that, whatever comes into existence on whatever level does so in dependence on causes and conditions. So far we have discussed the importance of *Pratītyasamutpāda* in cosmological speculation, which is the one side of the doctrine. Now we focus our attention on the second side of the doctrine, i.e., its importance in semantics.

Importance of *Pratītyasamutpāda* in Semantics

The doctrine of *Pratītyasamutpāda* plays vital role in explaining the meaning of a concept or judgment. For example, the concept of short (*hrasva*) is intelligible only in relation to the concept of long (*dīrgha*) and vice versa.¹³ A concept is neither short nor tall in itself, it is only when we come to compare two concepts that in relation to one, the other is long or short as the case may be, i.e., the concept of longness arises because there is

a concept of shortness and vice versa. This interpretation of the causal principle is also expressed in *Samyuktanikāya*: “That which is the element of light..... is seen to exist on account of (in relation to) darkness; that which is the element of good is seen to exist on account of bad; that which is the element of space is seen to exist on account of form (*rūpa*)”.¹⁴ Besides, this idea of relativity is also discussed by Nāgārjuna in his *Ratnāvalī*, where he maintains that the relationship between the ideas of short and long does not owe to intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*).¹⁵ Thus, the basic function of this doctrine is to highlight the fact that a concept or judgment derives its meaning in relation to another concept or judgment.

Various later schools came to their own, sometimes radical, understanding of this doctrine. Chief among these is that of the Mādhyamika school of Nāgārjuna. According to Nāgārjuna the flip side of *Śūnyatā* is *Pratītyasamutpāda*. They are two sides of the same coin. They mean the same thing, but from two different perspectives. To the extent that *Śūnyatā* is a negative concept (i.e., *niḥsvabhāva*, contentless), and *Pratītyasamutpāda* is the positive counterpart (i.e., an attempt to conceptualize the nature of the world). Moreover, according to Nāgārjuna, the doctrine of dependent origination could only be coherent if phenomena were devoid of self-essence (*svabhāva*). If they enjoyed a mere permanent mode of being, he argued, it would be impossible for them to be originated and ceased to be in the way the doctrine describes. In order to understand, what Nāgārjuna is talking about? We have to first of all highlight the philosophical debate going on within Buddhism over the metaphysical doctrine of causation between Sarvāstivādins and Sautrāntika of Theravāda tradition.

Sarvāstivādins and Sautrāntika theory of causation

The Sarvāstivādins were naïve realists, whereas the Sautrāntikas represent the critical phase in Buddhist realism. In order to explain the problem of causal continuity, created by the acceptance of the theory of momentariness, the Sarvāstivādins accept the theory of ‘own-nature’ (*svabhāva*), which lefts impressions on its theory of causation too. They distinguish between cause and conditions because they accepted the substantialist standpoint (*sadvādi*) that cause and the effect are connected by their ‘own-nature’. This implies that this own-nature is the substance (*dravya*) that survives through the past, present, and future and is therefore permanent and eternal. Moreover, there is a close resemblance between the Sarvāstivāda theory and the Sāṃkhya theory of causation, known as Identity theory (*satkāryavāda*). This is because, according to Sāṃkhya School, cause and effect are identical in essence as they are made of *Prakṛti*. And this *Prakṛti* is sometimes called *Svabhāva* (own-nature).

The Sautrāntika on the other hand, in order to solve the problem of causal continuity formulate a theory of immediate contiguity (*samanantara*) and grant causal efficiency to the immediately preceding *dhamma*. Since each moment was considered to be different from the other, and since no underlying substratum (like the *svabhāva* of the Sarvāstivādins) was recognized, they maintained that there was only a series of moments succeeded one another, the causation of each individual moment being reduced to invariable antecedence. Further, regarding the origin and beginning of the series, the Sautrāntika presented the theory of *abhūtvabhāva utpāda* according to which the first member of the series being non-existent comes into existence. Moreover, because of this theory, it is

parallel with the non-identity theory (*asatkāryavāda*) of Vaiśeṣikas. Just as the identity theory leads to a belief in permanence, so does the non-identity theory lead to a belief in annihilation or the absence of continuity.

But, to Nāgārjuna the views of these two rival Buddhist schools are unacceptable because he claims that these theories actually make it impossible to accept what is so evident to our experience, the fact of dependent arising. Therefore, Nāgārjuna came with a new interpretation of the universal principle of *Pratītyasamutpāda*, which completely changed the picture of the Buddha's teaching and presented a landmark in the history of Indian Philosophy.

Nāgārjuna's view of *Pratītyasamutpāda*

Nāgārjuna started his famous book *Madhyamakakārikā* by saluting his great teacher Buddha, who preached the doctrine of dependent origination and says that from transcendental standpoint *Pratītyasamutpāda* is itself *Nirvāṇa* and all the multiplicity divides into it. Moreover, it is in the hand of Nāgārjuna, that the doctrine is so interpreted as it would result in the denial of the objective reality of the world. (i.e., he is only denying the objective existence of all phenomena and not its metaphysical existence). It is a critique of 'How we think' rather than 'What there are'.¹⁶ Now, in order to understand how, Nāgārjuna achieved this?, we have to first of all highlight the difference between the early Buddhist and Nāgārjuna's reformulation of the devastating universal principle of *Pratītyasamutpāda*.

Nāgārjuna was quite aware that *Pratītyasamutpāda* was the central tenet of Buddhist and that the Buddha's Enlightenment consisted in the discovery of the causal principle. Therefore in setting forth his dialectic method

(*prasaṅga*), he retained one aspect of the theory of causation recognized by early Buddhist, the idea of relativity. Then he raised the principle from the empirical level to that of transcendental level.

The early Buddhist theory of causation was called the middle path (*madhyamā pratipad*) because it steered clear of the two extremes between eternalism and annihilationism. And then this middle path is described in terms of the twelvefold causal formula in its progressive and regressive orders. Whereas, in Nāgārjuna's interpretation these two extremes are criticized from the standpoint of ultimate reality, as different from the early Buddhist, who rejects the two metaphysical theories and gives a causal account of the phenomenal reality. Moreover, the definition of the middle path in the former, as consisting of twelvefold causal account, is omitted in the latter. Further, the middle path in the former is empirical and phenomenal, where as in the latter it is transcendental. Therefore, to identify causality with the transcendental reality, Nāgārjuna defines *Pratītyasamutpāda* by equating it with eight negations as:

Neither ceasing nor arising, neither annihilation nor eternalism;

Neither identity nor difference, neither appearance nor disappearance.¹⁷

The elevation of causal principle from the phenomenal to the transcendental level seems to have created many problems for the *Mādhyamikas*. Therefore, Nāgārjuna attempts to resolve the conflict between the ultimate and phenomenal realities by adopting a novel technique of dialectical method (*prasaṅga*), in which the thesis is constituted by the causal theories of Sāṃkhya and Sarvāstivāda (self-causation or *satkāryavāda*), and antithesis by Vaiśeṣika and Sautrāntika theories (external-causation or *asatkāryavāda*). This dialectic shows that it

is not possible to establish the relationship between cause and effect in terms of identity or difference or in their simultaneous affirmation or simultaneous denial. Thus, by showing this, he demonstrated the futility of speculative metaphysics. He says that, the nature of human subjectivity is such that an idea or concept formed by it falsely gives it a feeling that the latter has the power to refer to and represent external reality possessing its self-same nature. Nāgārjuna exposes this nature of subjectivity as well and proves the voidness (*śūnyatā*) of such self-same nature (*niḥsvabhāvatā*).¹⁸ But, now the pertinent questions are: What does Nāgārjuna mean by *Śūnyatā*, whether it means lack of inherent essence (independent existence) or non-existence? And how, according to Nāgārjuna, *Pratītyasamutpāda*, *Śūnyatā*, and lack of inherent existence function as synonyms?

Pratītyasamutpāda verses Śūnyatā

For Nāgārjuna, when we say of a table that it is empty, it is not to say that it is completely non-existent, but that it does not exist ‘from its own side’. That its existence as the object that it is, as a table, depends not only upon it or any purely non-relational characteristics, but upon us as well and also on its parts, on its causes, on its material and so forth. Apart from these, there is no table. The table, we might say, is a purely arbitrary piece of space-time chosen by us as the referent of a single name, and not an entity demanding on its own, recognition and philosophical analysis to reveal its essences. That independent character is precisely what it lacks, on this view. He is mainly denying the objective existence of a table (spatial-temporal sequence) and not its metaphysical existence. This is his emptiness (*śūnyatā*), which is the universal and ultimate interpretation of all

conceptual interpretation. Regarding the answer of the second question about the synonymy of *Pratītyasamutpāda* and *Śūnyatā*, there are two interpretations given by Nāgārjuna, one is the ‘Jewel Net of Indra’ and another is a ‘Rainbow’. According to the first, all reality is to be understood on the analogy with Indra’s Net. This net consists entirely of jewels. Each jewel reflects all of the other jewels, and the existence of each jewel is wholly dependent on its reflection in all of the other jewels. Similarly in another interpretation of rainbow, we know that a rainbow is real in some sense, because we can see it, locate it, measure it, and so forth. However, it is also clear that a rainbow is no thing but rather the product of various forces interacting as sunlight shines through an atmosphere that has water droplets in suspension. As such, all parts of reality (all phenomena) are like this, interdependent with each other. In as much as it is impossible to locate any basic particle or entity that is dependent in no way for its definition and existence on the relationship that it has to other things. All things are, therefore, empty and dependently co-arisen.

Furthermore, this dual thesis of the conventional reality of phenomena together with their lack of inherent existence depends upon the complex doctrine of the two truths or two realities - a conventional truth (*saṃvṛti satya*) and an ultimate truth (*paramārtha satya*). It is, in fact, this sophisticated development of the doctrine of the two truths as a vehicle for understanding Buddhist metaphysics and epistemology that is Nāgārjuna’s greatest philosophical contribution. Moreover, according to Nāgārjuna, those who do not know the distinction between these two truths, can never know the true import of the Buddha’s teachings.¹⁹ Therefore, both the Buddha and Nāgārjuna emphasized on the need to develop Awakened Wisdom into the

universal principle of conditioned arising underlying in both the realism of ontological and conceptual and its analysis to demonstrate the ultimate emptiness. We stop at this point, but we will talk about the two-levels of truth again in the 5th chapter of this thesis, at a greater length.

Concluding Remarks

From this long discussion, this detour may lead to the following conclusion that in reality all things exist in a constant flow or flux. Each and every component part comes into being due to the break up or disintegration of other component parts; and each of these parts does not have its own essence and arises and passes away one after the other in an unending succession, without absolute certainty or stability. This flows of course because all of the component parts have a connected and interdependent causal relationship and because each component has no essence of its own and is, therefore, in constant flux. All of this goes in accordance with nature and depends upon the relationship of combined and dependent effects; there are no other forces coming into play dependent on a creator or mysterious power. And one, who realizes this truth, attains Enlightenment.

Notes and References

1. *Samyuktanikaya*- 2.36.
2. 'yo paṭiccasamuppādam passati so dhammaṃ passati, yo dhammaṃ passati so paṭiccasam uppadaṃ passati.' *MI*, pp. 190.37-191.2.
3. *tathatā anvitathatā anaññathatā idappaccayatā ayaṃ vuccati paṭiccasamuppādo*, *S* 2.26
4. According to Buddhagosa: 'Since there is no failure, even for a moment, to produce the events that arise when the conditions come together, there is said to be necessity'. *SA* 2.41: *sāmaggim upagatesu paccayesu muhuttam pi tato nibbattānaṃ dhammānaṃ asambhavābhāvato avitathatā*, for details see, Kaluphana, (1975), p.93.
5. Buddhaghosh defines: 'since no effect different from the effect arises with the help of other events or conditions, there is said to be invariability. *SA* 2.41: *aññadhammapaccayehi aññadhammānuppattito anaññathatāti*.
6. Buddhaghosh's definition runs: From the condition or group of conditions that gives rise to such states as decay and death there is said to be conditionality. *SA* 2.41: *yathā vuttānaṃ etesaṃ jarāmaranādīnaṃ paccayato vā paccayasamūhatovā idappaccayatā ti vutto*.
7. *Samyuktanikaya*- 2.28:
imasmim sati, idaṃ hoti;
imassa uppādā idaṃ uppajjati.
imasmim asati, idaṃ nahoti;
imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati.

8. Ibid., II. 12.1, pp. 1.2
9. *M* 1.167
10. For details see Kalupahana, (1975), p.110.
11. *Samyuktanīkaya*- 4.128
12. *M* 1.111-112.
13. *MKV*- *asmin satīdaṃ bhavati hrasva dīrghaṃ yathā sati/
iti vyākhyāyamāneṇa nanu tad evābhyupagataṃ bhavati,
hrasvaṃ pratītya, hrasvamṃ prāpya, hrasvaṃ apeksya dīrghaṃ
bhavatīti//*
14. *S* 2.150, 'yāyaṃ..... ābhādhātu ayaṃ dhātu andhakāraṃ paṭicca
paññayatī. yāyaṃ..... subhadhātu ayaṃ dhātu asubhaṃ
paṭicca paññayatī. yāyaṃ..... ākāsañcāyatanadhātu ayaṃ
dhātu rūpaṃ paṭicca paññayatī.'
15. *Ratnāvalī* 1.49, *hrasva sati punar dīrghaṃ na bhavati svabhāvataḥ.*
16. For details see, H.S. Prasad (2007), p. 389.
17. *MKP*, p. 11
*anirodham anutpādam anucchedam aśāśvatam/
anekārtham anānārtham anāgamam anirgamam//*
18. For details see, H.S. Prasad (2007), p. 392.
19. *MK* 24.9
*ye ' nayorna vijānanti vibhāgam satyayor dvayoḥ/
te tattvaṃ na vijānanti gambhiraṃ buddhaśāsane//*