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**Interdependent Origination**

In Buddha’s word - a profound and an important teaching

Ananda once remarked, that despite its apparent difficulty the teaching of Interdependent Origination is actually quite simple, "How amazing! Never before has it occurred to me, Lord. This principle of Dependent Origination, although so profound and hard to see, yet appears to me to be so simple!"

In the following exchange with Venerable Ananda, the Buddha rebuked him and cautioned against underestimating the profundity of the principle of Dependent Origination:

"Say not so, Ananda, say not so. This principle of Dependent Origination is a profound teaching, hard to see. It is through not knowing, not understanding and not thoroughly realizing this teaching that beings are confused like a tangled thread, thrown together like bundles of threads, caught as in a net, and cannot escape hell, the nether worlds and the wheel of samsara." [S.II.92]

The teaching of Interdependent Origination is certainly one of the most important and profound teachings in Buddhism. In the words of the Buddha: “He who sees dependent arising sees the Dhamma; he who sees the Dhamma sees dependent arising.” MN 28; [M.I.191]

Our fear of Interdependent Origination is to some extent unwarranted. To begin with, there is nothing particularly difficult about the term itself. After all, we all know what "interdependence" means, and what "birth," "origination," or "arising" means. Only when we begin to examine the function and contents of Interdependent Origination do we recognize the fact that it is a very profound and significant teaching.

Some indication of this can be gained from the Buddha's own statements. The Buddha very frequently expressed his experience of enlightenment in one of two ways: either in terms of having understood the **Four Noble Truths**, or in terms of having understood **Interdependent Origination**. Conversely, he often said that, in order to attain enlightenment, one has to understand the meaning of these truths.

The principle of causality - the law of cause and effect

On the basis of the Buddha's own statements, we can see a very close relation between the Four Noble Truths and Interdependent Origination. What is it that these two formulas have in common? The principle they have in common is the principle of causality--the law of cause and effect, of action and consequence. Before we have mentioned that the Four Noble Truths are divided into two groups--the first two (suffering and the cause of suffering) and the last two (the end of suffering and the path to the end of suffering). In both these groups, it is the law of cause and effect that governs the relationship. In other words, suffering is the effect of the cause of suffering, and the end of suffering is the effect of the path to the end of suffering.

Here, too, with Interdependent Origination, the fundamental principle at work is that of cause and effect. In Interdependent Origination, we have a more detailed description of what actually takes place in the causal process. Let us take a few examples that illustrate the nature of Interdependent Origination used by the Buddha himself.

Examples

The Buddha said the flame in an oil lamp burns dependent on the oil and the wick: when the oil and wick are present, the flame burns, but if either is absent, the flame will cease to burn. Let us also take the example of the sprout: dependent on the seed, earth, water, air, and sunlight, the sprout arises.

There are innumerable examples of Interdependent Origination because there is no existing phenomenon that is not the effect of Interdependent Origination. All these phenomena arise dependent on a number of causal factors. Very simply, this is the principle of Interdependent Origination.

Not the evolution of the world

**Interdependent Origination is not about the evolution of the universe** – it has to do with the problem of suffering and how to free ourselves from suffering:

We are particularly interested in the principle of Interdependent Origination insofar as it concerns the problem of suffering and rebirth. We are interested in how Interdependent Origination explains the situation in which we find ourselves here and now. In this sense, it is important to remember that Interdependent Origination is essentially and primarily a teaching that has to do with the problem of suffering and how to free ourselves from suffering, and not a description of the evolution of the universe.

Meaning

*Paticca* means ‘because of’ or ‘dependent upon’ whereas *samuppada* means ‘arising’ or ‘origination.’ Based on this the literal translation would be ‘arising because of’ or ‘dependent arising/origination; the term refers to the whole causal formula consisting of twelve interdependent causes and effects. The doctrine of Paticca Samuppada is the doctrine of the conditionality of all physical and mental phenomena. The doctrine of Paticca Samuppada together with the doctrine of impersonality (anatta) creates the essential situation for the real understanding and realization of the teaching of the Buddha. In other word, these two doctrines teach impersonality and conditionality through analytical and synthetical methods.

The short formula of the doctrine:

The principle of this doctrine is given in a short formula of four lines.

imasmim sati idam hoti (when this is, that is);

imassuppada idam uppajjati (this arising, that arises);

imasmim asati idam na hoti (when this is not, that is not);

imassa nirodha idam nirujjhati ( this ceasing, that ceases). [SN 12, 21.]

In modern terms, it would be:

When A is, B is; A arising, B arises; When A is not, B is not; A ceasing, B ceases.

Standard Description of Dependent Origination:

Let us list the twelve components, or links, that make up Interdependent Origination and see what the Buddha meant by Dependent Origination.

This is how life arises, exists and continues:

Avijjapaccaya sankhara, sankhara paccaya vinnanam, vinnana paccaya namarupam, namarupa paccaya salayatanam, salayatana paccaya phasso, phassa paccayo vedana, vedana paccayo tanha, tanha paccayo upadanam, upadana paccayo bhavo, bhava paccayo jati, jati paccaya jaramaranam soka-parideva-dukkha-domanass-upayasa sambavanti. Evametassa kevalassa dukkha-khandhassa samudayo hoti. [SN 12, 1]

From delusion (avijja) as condition, volitional formations (samkhara) [come to be]; from volitional formations as condition, consciousness (vinnana); from consciousness as condition, name-and-form (namarupa); from name-and-form as condition, the six sense bases (salayayana); from the six sense bases as condition, contact (phassa); from contact as condition, feeling (vedana); from feeling as condition craving (tanha); from craving as condition, clinging (upadana); from clinging as condition, existence (bhava); from existence as condition, birth (jati); from birth as condition, aging-and-death (jara-marana), sorrow (soka), lamentation (parideva), pain (dukha), displeasure (domanassa), and despair (upayasa) come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

The formula in reverse order is the cessation of the process.

Avijjayatveva asesaviraganirodha sankharanirodho, sankharanirodho vinnananirodho, vinnanam nirodha namarupanirodho, namarupanirodha salayatananirodho, salayatananirodha phassanirodho, phassanirodha vedananirodho, vedananirodha tanhanirodho, tanhanirodha upadananirodho, upadananirodha bhavanirodho, bhavanirodha jatinirodho, jatinirodha jaramaranam soka-parideva-dukkha-domanass-upayasa nirujjanti. Evametassa kevalassa dukkha-khandassa nirodho hoti. [ SN 12, 1]

But from the remainderless/complete fading away and cessation of delusion or ignorance comes cessation of volitional formations; from the cessation of volitional formations, cessation of consciousness; from the cessation of consciousness, cessation of name-and-form; from the cessation of name-and form, cessation of the six sense bases; from the cessation of the six sense bases, cessation of contact; from cessation of contact, cessation of feeling; from the cessation of feeling, cessation of craving; from the cessation of craving, cessation of clinging; from the cessation of clinging, cessation of existence; from the cessation of existence, cessation of birth; from the cessation of birth, aging-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair cease. The twelve links of the standard principle of Dependent Origination format are counted from ignorance to aging and death only. As for 'sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair', these are actually by-products of aging and death. Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering. If we take this formula in reverse order, we come to the cessation of the process.

Thus, Paticca Samuppada can be divided into two limbs, the first showing the process of origination, the second, the process of cessation. The first limb, showing the process of origination (is called the samudayavara) is the sequence in its forward mode, and corresponds to the second of the Four Noble Truths, the cause of suffering (dukkha samudaya). The second limb, showing the process of cessation (is called the nirodhavara) is the sequence in its reverse mode and corresponds to the third Noble Truth, the cessation of suffering (dukkha nirodha).

Ignorance is at the beginning for the sake of clarity

The extended form given above contains twelve factors, interdependently linked in the form of a cycle. It has no beginning or ending. Putting ignorance at the beginning does not imply that it is the First Cause, or Genesis (origin), of all things. Ignorance is put at the beginning for the sake of clarity, by intercepting the cycle and establishing a starting point where it is considered most practical.

The twelve links of the standard principle of Dependent Origination format are counted from ignorance to aging and death only. As for 'sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair', these are actually by-products of aging and death for one with outflows (*asava*) and defilement, becoming 'fertilizer' for the further arising of outflows, and consequently ignorance, which turns the cycle once more.

The meaning of the twelve factors as described by the Buddha

The Nidanasamyutta of Samyutta Nikaya is a collection of suttas that are completely concerned with Paticca-samuppada. In Vibhanga Sutta, the second sutta in this collection, the Buddha gives the clearest explanation of what each of these terms mean. “It is important for us to understand exactly what The Buddha meant by these twelve terms. Fortunately, when The Buddha taught the Dhamma, He also explained in great detail what He meant by what He said” According to Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the Vibhanga Sutta, the meaning of these twelve terms are explained.

Aging-and-death (jara-marana):

The Buddha said: "What, bhikkhus, is aging-and-death? The aging of the various beings in the various orders of beings, their growing old, brokenness of teeth, greyness of hair, wrinkling of skin, decline of vitality, degeneration of the faculties: this is called aging.

The passing away of the various beings from the various orders of beings, their perishing, their break up, disappearance, mortality, death, completion of time, the break up of the aggregates, the laying down of the carcass: this is called death. Thus this aging and this death are together called aging-and-death."

Birth (jati):

“And what, bhikkhus, is birth? The birth of the various beings into the various orders of beings, their being born, descent (into the womb), reproduction, (abhinibbatti= (rebirth), the manifestation of the aggregates, the obtaining of the sense bases. This is called birth." (It is quite clear here that birth means what we would normally consider it to be: the arising in the human realm of a being in the womb.

Becoming (bhava)

And what, bhikkhus, is becoming (bhava)? There are these three kinds of becoming: sense-sphere becoming, form-sphere becoming, formless-sphere becoming. This is called becoming."

[The word "becoming" is used for the Pali bhava, brings out the meaning which is essentially dynamic. Perhaps "evolving" might be better. It is the unfolding of the effects of past actions (kamma) and the production of new actions.

In Buddhism the universe is classified into three realms: (a) the sensuous realm (dominated by the five senses) comprising the hells, the animal, ghost, and human worlds and six heavenly or deva worlds (but not including the brahmaloka); (b) the form realm, a subtler kind of existence enjoyed by the Brahma-gods. They are the silent worlds wherein one exists in the jhana attainments. They begin with the brahmaloka and include several other realms based on higher jhanas and (c) the formless realm, the beings of which do not have material bodies. The arupaloka are the worlds of pure mind, wherein one exists in one of the four immaterial attainments

Clinging (upadana)

And what, bhikkhus, is clinging (sometimes translated as 'fuel')? There are these four kinds of clinging: clinging to sensual objects/pleasures, clinging to (wrong) views, clinging to rules and vows, clinging to a doctrine of self. This is called clinging.

Silabbata: an outward show of ritualism and religious observances, such as ritual bathing, fasting, etc., thinking they will bring purity and release of themselves.

Attavada: belief in an eternal and unchanging ego-entity, either included in or independent of mind and body.

Craving (tanha):

And what, bhikkhus, is craving? There are these six classes of craving: craving for forms (sights), craving for sounds, craving for odors, craving for tastes, craving for tactile objects, craving for mental phenomena. This is called craving.

Feeling (vedana):

And what, bhikkhus, is feeling (vedana)? There are these six classes of feeling: feeling born of eye-contact, feeling born of ear-contact, feeling born of nose-contact, feeling born of tongue-contact, feeling born of body-contact, feeling born of mind-contact. This is called feeling.

Contact (phassa)

And what, bhikkhus, is contact? There are these six classes of contact: eye-contact, ear-contact, nose-contact, tongue-contact, body-contact, mind-contact. This is called contact.

Six-sense bases (salayatana)

And what, bhikkhus, are the six sense bases? The eye base, the ear base, the nose base, the tongue base, the body base, the mind base. These are called the six sense bases.

Ayatana: sphere of sense, basis for sensation. There are twelve ayatana altogether: the five sense organs, their respective objects, and the mind, which is regarded as a sense-organ, its object being ideas or thoughts.

Name and form (nama-rupa)

And what, bhikkhus, is name-and-form (nama-rupa)? Feeling, perception, volition (cetana), contact (phassa), and attention (manasikara): this is called name. The four great elements and the form derived from the four great elements: this is called form. Thus this name and this form are together called name-and-form.

The four great elements or qualities of matter are:

1. the earth-element, solidity, extension in space;
2. the water-element, cohesion, building matter into mass;
3. the fire-element, temperature either hot or cold, maturing;
4. the air-element, motion, vibration.

Consciousness (vinnana)

And what, bhikkhus, is consciousness? There are these six classes of consciousness: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, and mind-consciousness. This is called consciousness.

Volitional formations (samkhara)

And what, bhikkhus, are the volitional formations (sankhara)? There are these three kinds of volitional formations: the bodily volitional formation, the verbal volitional formation, the mental volitional formation. These are called the volitional formations."

“Volitional activity" is an interpretative rather than a literal translation of the word samkhara, an important technical term in Buddhist literature. The word means: formation, construction, determinant; either in the active sense of forming or putting together, or passively as what has been formed, put together or compounded. In this context the first meaning in the sense of active, kammic volitions, is intended.

Ignorance (avijja)

And what, bhikkhus, is ignorance (avijja)? Not knowing suffering, not knowing the origin of suffering, not knowing the cessation of suffering, not knowing the way leading to the cessation of suffering. This is called ignorance."

Knowledge (nana) is the understanding arising from training in meditation. It refers specifically to the knowledge gained on entering one of the stages of sanctity: stream-entry, once-returning, never-returning and arahatta or final emancipation

Over the course of three life-times:

Let us briefly consider the meanings of the twelve components, or factors that make up Interdependent Origination: (1) ignorance, (2) volition, (3) consciousness, (4) name and form, (5) the six sense spheres, (6) contact, (7) feeling, (8) craving, (9) clinging, (10) becoming, (11) birth, and (12) old age and death.

There are two principal ways we can understand these twelve components. One way to understand them is sequentially, over the course of three lifetimes--the past life, the present life, and the future life.

In this case, ignorance and volition belong to the past life. They represent the conditions responsible for the occurrence of this life. The eight components: consciousness, name and form, the six sense spheres, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, and becoming belong to this life. In brief, these eight components constitute the process of evolution within this lifetime. The last two components, birth and old age and death, belong to the future life.

According to that division:

Past: Ignorance (avijja) and Volition or Mental Formation (samkhara) (2)

Present: Consciousness (vinnana), Mind and corporeality (nama-rupa), Six Bases (salayatana), Contact (phassa), Feeling (vedana), Craving (tanha), Clinging (upadana), Process of Becoming (bhava) (8)

Future: Rebirth (jati) Old age and death (jara-marana) (2)

With the help of this scheme, we can see how the twelve components of Interdependent Origination are distributed over the three lifetimes--how the first two, ignorance and volition, result in the emergence of this life, with its psycho physical personality from the past, and how, in turn, the actions performed in this life result in rebirth in a future life. This is one popular and authoritative way of interpreting the twelve components of Interdependent Origination.

Cyclical interpretation of the twelve components into three categories:

The other interpretation of the relations among the twelve components of Interdependent Origination is also authoritative and has the support of recognized Buddhist masters and saints. It might be called a cyclical interpretation because it does not distribute the twelve components over the course of three lifetimes. Rather, it divides the twelve components into three categories: a) Afflictions (kilesa) b). Actions (kamma) c). Sufferings (dukkha)

In this second scheme, the three components of ignorance, craving, and clinging are viewed as belonging to the group of afflictions; volition and becoming, to the group of actions; and the remaining seven components--consciousness, name and form, the six sense spheres, contact, feeling, birth, and old age and death--to the group of sufferings.

a). Afflictions: Ignorance (avijja) Craving (tanha) Clinging (upadana)

b). Karma: Volition (samkhara), Becoming (bhava)

c). Suffering: Consciousness (vinnana), Name and Form (nama-rupa), Six-sense Spheres (ayatana), Contact (phassa), Feeling (vedana), Birth (jati), Old-age and Death (jara marana)

By means of this interpretation, we can see how the teaching of the Four Noble Truths--and particularly the teaching of the second truth (the cause of suffering) is conjoined with the teaching of karma and rebirth, and how these two important teachings together explain, in a more complete way, the process of rebirth and the origination of suffering.

You may recall that, in the context of discussing the Four Noble Truths, we said that ignorance, attachment, and ill-will are the causes of suffering. Now, if we look here at the three components of Interdependent Origination that are included in the group of afflictions, we find ignorance, craving, and clinging. Here, too, ignorance is the most basic. It is because of ignorance that we crave pleasures of the senses, existence, and nonexistence. Similarly, it is because of ignorance that we cling to pleasures of the senses, to pleasant experiences, to ideas, and most significantly, to the idea of an independent, permanent self. Thus ignorance, craving, and clinging are the cause of actions.

Volition and Becoming:

The two components of Interdependent Origination that are included in the group of actions are volition and becoming. Volition refers to the impressions, or habits, that we have formed in our stream of conscious moments, or conscious continuum. These impressions are formed by repeated actions. We can illustrate this with an example from geology. We know that a river forms its course by a process of repeated erosion. As rain falls on a hillside, that rain gathers into a rivulet, which gradually creates a channel for itself and grows into a stream. Eventually, as the channel of the stream is deepened and widened by repeated flows of water, the stream becomes a river, with well-defined banks and a definite course.

In the same way, our actions become habitual. These habits become part of our personality, and we take these habits with us from life to life in the form of what we call “volition”, “mental formation”, or "habit energy." Our actions in this life are conditioned by the habits we have formed over countless previous lifetimes.

To return to the analogy of the channel of a river and the water in it, we might say that mental formations are the channel of the river, while the actions that we perform in this life are the fresh water that flows through the eroded channel created by previous actions.

The actions that we perform in this life are represented by the component known as becoming. Hence we have the habits that we have developed over the course of countless lives, combined with new actions performed in this life, and these two together results in rebirth and suffering.

Summary

To summarize, we have the afflictions, which may be described as impurities of the mind--namely, ignorance, craving, and clinging. These mental impurities result in actions--both actions done in previous lives, which result in the formation of habit energy, or volition, and actions done in the present life, which correspond to the component known as becoming and which are liable to conform to the patterns established in previous lives.

Five components are causes of seven; seven components are effects of five

Together, (these) impurities of the mind and (these) actions result in rebirth. In other words, they result in consciousness, in name and form, in the six sense spheres, in contact between the six senses and the objects of the six senses, in feeling, which is born of that contact, in birth, and in old age and death. In this interpretation, the five components of Interdependent Origination included in the groups of afflictions (ignorance, craving, clinging); actions (volition and becoming) are the causes of rebirth and suffering. The other seven components (consciousness, name and form, the six sense spheres, contact, feeling, birth, and old age and death) are the effects of the afflictions and actions.

Together, the afflictions and actions explain the origin of suffering and the particular circumstances in which each of us finds him or herself, the circumstances in which we are born. You may recall that we referred to the fact that, whereas the afflictions are common to all living beings, karma differs from person to person. In other words, although the afflictions account for the fact that all of us are prisoners within Samsara, our actions account for the fact that some are born as human beings, others as gods, and still others as animals. In this sense, the twelve components of Interdependent Origination present a picture of Samsara with its causes and its effects.

Samsara, a vicious circle

There would be no point in painting this picture of Samsara if we did not intend to use it to change our situation, to get out of the round of birth and death. Recognizing the circularity of Samsara, the circularity of Interdependent Origination, is the beginning of liberation. How is this so? As long as afflictions and actions are present, rebirth and suffering will occur. When we see that ignorance, craving, clinging, and actions repeatedly lead to rebirth and suffering, we will recognize the need to break this vicious circle.

An example

Let us take a practical example. Suppose you are looking for the home of an acquaintance you have never visited before. Suppose you have been driving about for half an hour and have failed to find the home of your friend, and suppose suddenly you recognize a landmark and it dawns on you that you passed it half an hour ago. At that moment it will also dawn on you that you have been going around in circles, and you will stop and look at your road map, or inquire the way from a passerby so as to stop going around in circles and reach your destination.

Understanding Interdependent Origination is the key to liberation

This is why the Buddha said that he who sees Interdependent Origination sees the Dharma, and he who sees the Dharma sees the Buddha. This is also why he said that understanding Interdependent Origination is the key to liberation. Once we see the functioning of Interdependent Origination, we can set about breaking its vicious circle.

We can do this by removing the impurities of the mind--ignorance, craving, and clinging. Once these impurities are eliminated, actions will not be performed and habit energy will not be produced. Once actions cease, rebirth and suffering will also cease.

Basic meaning of the Middle Way

I would like to spend a little time on another important meaning of Interdependent Origination--namely, Interdependent Origination as an expression of the Middle Way. Before we had occasion to refer to the Middle Way, but confined ourselves to only the most basic meaning of the term.] We said that the Middle Way means avoiding the extreme of indulgence in pleasures of the senses and also the extreme of self- mortification. In that context, the Middle Way is synonymous with moderation.

Meaning of Middle way in the context of Interdependent Origination

In the context of Interdependent Origination, the Middle Way has another meaning, which is related to its basic meaning, but deeper. In this context, the Middle Way means avoiding the extremes of eternalism and nihilism.

How is this so? The flame in an oil lamp exists dependent on the oil and the wick. When either of these is absent, the flame will be extinguished. Therefore, the flame is neither permanent nor independent. Similarly, this personality of ours depends on a combination of conditions: the afflictions and karma. It is neither permanent nor independent.

Avoidance of eternalism and nihilism

Recognizing the conditioned nature of our personalities we avoid the extreme of eternalism, that is, of affirming the existence of an independent, permanent self. Alternatively, recognizing that this personality, this life, does not arise by accident or mere chance but is conditioned by corresponding causes, we avoid the extreme of nihilism, that is, of denying the relation between actions and their consequences.

Although nihilism is the primary cause of rebirth in states of woe and is to be rejected, eternalism, too, is not conducive to liberation. One who clings to the extreme of eternalism will perform wholesome actions and be reborn in states of happiness, as a human being or even as a god, but he will never attain liberation. Through avoiding these two extremes--through understanding the Middle Way--we can achieve happiness in this life and in future lives by performing wholesome actions and avoiding unwholesome actions, and eventually achieve liberation as well.

The Buddha constructed his teachings with infinite care. Indeed, the way he taught is sometimes likened to the behavior of a tigress toward her young. When a tigress carries her young in her teeth, she is most careful to see that her grip is neither too tight nor too loose. If her grip is too tight, it will injure or kill her cub. If it is too loose, the cub will fall and will also be hurt. Similarly, the Buddha was careful to see that we avoid the extremes of eternalism and nihilism.

Because he saw that clinging to the extreme of eternalism would bind us in samsara, the Buddha was careful to teach us to avoid belief in an independent, permanent self; seeing that the possibility of freedom could be destroyed by the sharp teeth of belief in a self, he therefore asked us to avoid the extreme of eternalism. Understanding that clinging to the extreme of nihilism would lead to catastrophe and rebirth in the states of woe, the Buddha was also careful to teach the reality of the law of cause and effect, or moral responsibility; seeing that we would fall into the misery of the lower realms should we deny this law, he therefore taught us to avoid the extreme of nihilism. This dual objective is admirably achieved through the teaching of Interdependent Origination, which safeguards not only our understanding of the conditioned and impermanent nature of the personality, but also our understanding of the reality of the law of cause and effect. In the context of Interdependent Origination, we have established the conditioned and impermanent nature of the personality, or self, by exposing its dependent nature.