

Pratitya-Samutpada and Causation

“As the ignorant grasp the fingertip and not the moon, so those who cling to the letter, know not my truth.” – Buddha (Lankavatara Sutra)¹

Pratitya-Samutpada is a Buddhist technical term most often translated into English as “The Chain of Causation.” An almost as frequent translation is “The Twelffold Chain of Interdependent Originations.” Stcherbatsky renders it as *Dependent Origination* or *Combined Dependent Origination*,² Conze refers to it as *Conditioned co-production* or *Conditioned Genesis*.³ Alexandra David-Neel calls it *Interdependent Originations* or *The Doctrine of the Twelve Causes*.⁴ As with a lot of technical terms in English, particularly those in the biological and social sciences, Buddhist technical terms in Sanskrit often mean something other than what the common usage would imply. What Buddhist writers and Buddha himself intended, in my opinion, tends to be obscured by temporal distance and over-intellectualization.

From the Pali Canon, the Samyutta-Nikaya explains the Pratitya-Samutpada thus:

... one who is in the light of the highest knowledge. . . considers how the world arises, belief in the non-being of the world passes away. And for one who is in the light of the highest knowledge. . . considers how the world ceases, belief in the being of the world passes away. . . He does not doubt or question that it is only evil that ceases from existence, and his conviction of this fact is dependent on no one besides himself. This is what constitutes Right Belief.⁵

That things have being. . . constitutes one extreme of doctrine; that things have no being is the other extreme. These extremes. . . have been avoided by the Tathagata, and it is a middle doctrine he teaches: S

On ignorance (avidya) depends karma;

On karma depends consciousness;⁶

On consciousness depend name and form;

On name and form depend the six organs of sense;⁷

¹ D.T.Suzuki, translator: *Lankavatara Sutra* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. 1932) p.93

² Stcherbatsky, F. I., *Buddhist Logic, Vol. 1* (New York, Dover Books 1962) p. 119. Stcherbatsky also makes reference to Pratitya-Samutpada as “causation,” and in another work as “dependently-together-origination.” [*The Conception of Buddhist Nirvana* Lenningrad, The Academy of Arts and Sciences of the USSR 1927) p.9]

³ Conze, Edward, editor, *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages* (New York, Harper and Row 1964) pp 65, 314

⁴ David-Neel, Alexandra and Lama Yongden, *The Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects* (San Francisco, City Lights 1967) p. 42

⁵ This is a fine elucidation of what constitutes “Right Belief,” part of the eightfold path.

⁶ *vijnana* = practical knowledge or pattern, Stcherbatsky, *Nirvana, op.cit.*, p/ 241, extrapolated from material in the book.

⁷ The Buddhists consider the mind as an organ of sense, along with the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and tactile facility.

“On the six organs of sense depends contact;
 “On contact depends sensation;
 “On sensation depends desire;
 “On desire depends attachment;⁸
 “On attachment depends existence;
 “On existence depends birth;
 “On birth depend old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, grief, and despair. Thus does the entire aggregation of misery arise.”⁹

Also from the Pali, the Visuddi-Magga: “Inasmuch as it is dependently on each other and in unison and *simultaneously* that the factors which constitute originate the elements of being, therefore did the sage [Buddha] call these factors Dependent Origination.”¹⁰

It is seen from these passages that Buddha’s middle path equates to Pratitya-Samutpada. Pratitya-Samutpada is the clear channel between the Sylla of non-existence and the Charybdis of existence. In syllogistic logic, there are only two choices: either something exists or it does not – either it *is* or it *is not*. In Buddhist logic, there is an extension to all possibilities: either something *is, is not, is and is not, or neither is nor is not*. Although in most cases the absolute existence of something is not important. Buddha says,

The religious life. . . does not depend on the dogma that the world is eternal; nor does the religious life. . . depend on the dogma that the world is not eternal. Whether the dogma obtain. . . that the world is eternal, or that the world is not eternal, there still remain birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair,¹¹ for the extinction of which is the present life I am prescribing.¹²

Broad metaphysical and cosmological questions such as the eternality of the world (universe) are given relatively little import, whereas the basic ontological question of the being-nonbeing duality is essential to and understanding of Buddha’s philosophy. Buddha expounds the concept of prajna amala,¹³ or transcendent wisdom. This transcendent wisdom is employed to one objective – Nirvana. Nirvana merely amounts to an alternate synchronicity, a different view. A commonly stated definition of Nirvana is that Nirvana is Samsara properly understood (Samsara being the world of impermanence, flux, and illusion).

“*Nirvana* and *Samsara*. . . are not two different things, but one and the same thing seen from two different points of view by onlookers whose degree of sharpness of mental vision differs widely.”¹⁴ The acquisition of transcendent wisdom allows the viewer to see samsara as nirvana, and nirvana as samsara.

⁸ Also called “prehension” by Franklin Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary* (Delhi, India, Motilal Banarsidass 1972) p. 384; and called “grasping attachment” by David-Neel, *op. cit.*, p. 48

⁹ Warren, H. C., *Buddhism in Translations* (Cambridge, Mass., Athenaeum Press 1896) p. 165

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 186. My italics.

¹¹ “birth” and “old age. . . despair” being the last two elements in the enumeration of Pratitya-Samutpada.

¹² from Sutta 63 of Majjhima-Nikaya, E.A. Burtt, *Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* (New York, The New American Library 1955) p. 35

¹³ Stcherbatsky, *Nirvana, op. cit.* p. 9

¹⁴ David-Neel, *op. cit.*, p. 121

To acquire prajna amala one must bring about the cessation of ignorance (avidya). As stated in the Pali canon (Lalitavistara XIII, 103), “Ignorance is the condition of all conditioned things; but in real truth these conditioned things are not. For conditioned things are just empty, by their own inner nature without ability to act.”¹⁵

The steps in the Pratitya-Samutpada could be rephrased to read: ignorance *conditions* and therefore *produces* karma (action, work); karma *conditions* and therefore *produces* consciousness¹⁶ . . . birth *conditions* and therefore *produces* old age and death, etc. Another way of saying this would be that ignorance is a condition necessary for karma. . . etc. Ignorance must be in evidence for there to be action; action must be in evidence for there to be consciousness, and so on.

On the immediate surface, this seems to say that ignorance is the root cause of the other links in the chain, and indeed, this is the interpretation placed on it by many writers, adherents, and scholars. But this, I feel, is not the case. Ignorance is merely a prerequisite to the others. One could not actually say that birth (jati) is the cause of death (marana), but unless birth has transpired there is no possibility of death. If there is birth, death follows of necessity (whatever comes into being ceases to be). But, birth does not *cause* death.

Another example would be a solid building’s foundation built on bedrock. The bedrock does not *cause* the foundation. It is merely a necessary precedent to the foundation. The frame of the building is dependent on the foundation, but the foundation is not in a causal relationship to the frame. It is supportive of and necessary to the frame, but it is not causal to the frame. It is easy to see how it would be a simple matter to build the foundation of a house and never erect the frame. This would be analogous to having a *cause* without an effect, if we proposed that the foundation caused the frame (causation in this and every other case being defined in relation to the effect: for every cause there is an effect). If this is so and “frame” is “foundation’s” effect, and “foundation” is in evidence but “frame” is not, then the cause, “foundation” is without its effect. This would amount to a logical inconsistency.

Even this explanation is inadequate to a non-causal elucidation of Pratitya-Samutpada. In fact, any verbal description would fail to describe the concept. The most that can be done is to try to point at it, and hope the fingertip is not taken to be the moon.

If we say that a cause ‘produces’ something, it is only an inadequate conventional (*samketa*) expression, a metaphor (*upalaksanam*). We ought to have said: ‘The result arises in functional dependence upon such and such a thing (*tat tad iasritva upadyate*). Since the result springs up immediately after the existence of the cause, there is between them no interval, during which some ‘work’ could be done. There is no operating of the cause, this operating produces nothing (*akimcit-kara eva vyaparah*). The mere existence of the cause constitutes its work (*sattiaiva vyapritih*). If we therefore ask, what is it then that is called the ‘operation’ of a cause producing its effect, and what is it that is called the ‘dependence’ of the effect upon its cause, the answer will be the following one: we call dependence of the effect upon its cause the fact that it always follows upon the presence of that cause and we call operation of the cause the fact that the cause always precedes its effect. The cause is the thing itself,¹⁷ the bare thing, the thing cut loose of every extension, of every additional working force (*yastu-matrum vilaksana-vyapara-rahitam hetuh*).¹⁸

The above definition of the dependence of the cause on the effect is nearly identical to Kant’s idea of causation. However, both Kant and Stcherbatsky presuppose an ordered working of cause and effect,

¹⁵ Conze, *op. cit.*, p.159

¹⁶ See note 9. above.

¹⁷ This can be thought of much in the same way as Kant’s *ding am sich*.

¹⁸ Stcherbatsky, *Buddhist Logic, Vol. I, op. cit.*, p. 121

whereas, at the root of Buddhist ontology there is no underlying orderliness. “For the Buddhist the only reality is the efficient point-instant, all the rest is interpretation and thought construction.”¹⁹ The concept of “instantaneous being” (*ksanika-vada*), embodied in the preceding sentence, is central to the logic and religious doctrine of Buddhism. The parts (*dharmas*) are the only reality. The whole, and the intermediate aggregates are merely interpretation. It is like overlaying a pattern on a random arrangement so that there is an appearance of order, where actually there is not. There is an appearance of duration and causality, but these do not exist in themselves. They are extrapolated, interpreted from random information.

There is a difference of opinion about the point-instants and the nature of ultimate reality (*paramaitha-sat*)²⁰ between the Hinayana (Theravadin) Buddhists and the Mahayana Buddhists. But the difference is itself a matter of interpretation and can be dealt with on a superficial level. Both groups have basically the same view of causation through the theory of instantaneous being. In the development of Buddhist thought on causality, the point-instants (*dharmas*) appear at random and annihilate themselves in the same moment that they appear.²¹

All these elementary data were conceived as obeying causal laws. But the conception of causality was adapted to the character of these entities which neither move nor change, but could only appear and disappear. Causation was called dependently-coordinated-origination (*pratitya-samutpa*), or dependent existence. The meaning of it was that every momentary entity sprang into existence, or flashed up, in coordination with other moments. Its formula was ‘if there is this, there appears that.’ (The same formula in the Pali Kanon – Majjh, II. 32. Samy. II. 28, etc. – in the Ab. Kosa. III. 18 and 28 and Madhy. vr., p. 10. In the latter instance – *asmin sati idam bhavati, hrasve dirgham vatha sati*, the formula clearly refers to coordination, not to causation) Causality was thus assumed to exist between these moments only, the appearance of every moment being coordinated with the appearance of a number of other moments. Strictly speaking it was no causality at all, no question of one thing *producing* the other. There could be neither a *causa materialis*, since there was no continuant substance, nor could there be any *causa efficiens*, since one momentary entity, disappearing as it did at once, could not influence any other entity. So the formula was supplemented by another one ‘not from itself (*causa materialis*), not from something foreign (*causa efficiens*), nor from a combination of both spring up’, (Samy. II. 113 and Madhy. K.r. I. 1, XII. 1.) ‘it is coordinated and not really produced’. (Madhy. Vr., p. 7 – *tat tat prapya yad utpannam tat svabhavatah*, *ibid.*, p. 375,6 – *paramarthato ‘tyantanutpadatvat sarvadharmanam*.)²²

The Mahayana view is the opposite of the Hinayana view of reality. The Mahayanists assert that the whole is the only reality.²³ In essence, the two views converge at a point beyond the rational faculty, and either approach may be taken to whatever problem, and the teachings of the Buddha will support either. Both ultimately deny causation, either in the scientific or the Kantian sense. Causality is a result of trying to ascribe order to the universe. It is an invention of mind. It is merely an aspect of *avidya*.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 92

²⁰ Stcherbatsky, *Buddhist Logic, Vol. I, op. cit.*, p. 181

²¹ Stcherbatsky, F. I., *The Central Conception of Buddhism and the Meaning of the Word Dharma*, (Delhi, India, Motilal Banarsidass 1970) pp 11-27, 73-75; also *Buddhist Logic, vol. I, op. cit.*, pp 79-118

²² Stcherbatsky, *Nirvana*, p. 33

²³ Suzuki, B. L., *Mahayana Buddhism* (New York, The MacMillan Company 1969) p. 33

The concept of time is essential to uphold causality. “Time and space cannot be separated from the things that exist in them. Hence they are not separate entities.”²⁴ There is no time in the field of absolute being, therefore there is no causality, except in the sense of a mental concept divorced from actual reality. This is closely akin to the notion of the phenomenologists of *Ego-cogito-cogitatum*, wherein there can be no perception of the world apart from the perceiver and the perceived. Likewise there is nothing to be perceived without the perceiver or the act of perception. Perception and causality are both the interaction of the mind with its processes and its environment.

From the Mahayanist point of view, there is no inherent order in the universe except inasmuch as the totality of the universe is a synergistic unity; *one* being orderly by definition, yet remaining indefinable. Unity is not definable except in relation to plurality, which is not possible in an absolute context. There can be only one totality of all – only one infinite set.

If there is no order, except in totality, yet we discern order, then the order which we discern must be inherent in our consciousness, not in the physical (or, if you will, the phenomenal) universe. Order is a function of mind. It is a resonance of chaos with chaos which gives the appearance of form, much like the blending of two musical notes to form a “beat” harmonic that only exists in perception.

Nominalistically, one cannot determine the nature of totality, for totality is a synergism. The sum of the parts is not less than the whole, but is, instead, inappropriate to the whole. One must approach the question of causality from the opposite direction – from a universalistic viewpoint. To understand the parts, the whole must first be comprehended. When the whole is understood, an understanding of the parts and their relationships is then possible. Taken separately, understandings of the parts and their relationships can never yield the whole. Spinoza said that the more we know of particular things, the more we know of God (the whole). This seems like a naive arrogance on Spinoza’s part, for we cannot know the whole merely from its parts. Perhaps what he said is true to a limited extent, however. To *know* (*kennen/wissen*) God would be to possess infinite knowledge; it would be *to be God*. Given the limited human life span, the eventual accumulation of this knowledge is not possible. One cannot end up in the infinite unless he starts in the infinite. Accumulations of finite knowledge can never amount to an infinite knowledge.

Another way of seeing Pratitya Samutpada is as synonymous with relativity (*śūnyatā*).²⁵ *Śūnyatā* is derived from the Sanskrit root *śunya*, which means ‘devoid of independent reality. . . dependent, relative, unreal. . .’²⁶ *Sunyata* also means ‘emptiness, void.’²⁷ Taking the etymology and correlations of the term further, we find that Pratitya-Samutpada = *śunyata* = *madhyama pratipad*²⁸ (middle course between two opposite extremes) = *upadaya-prajñapti*²⁹ (the ground of reality and knowledge of reality) =

²⁴ Stcherbatsky, *Buddhist Logic, Vol. I, op. cit.*, p. 85

²⁵ Stcherbatsky, *Nirvana, op. cit.*, p. 46

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 242

²⁷ Edgerton, *op. cit.*, p. 532

²⁸ Stcherbatsky, *Nirvana, op. cit.*, p. 81

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 199, and Edgerton, *op. cit.*, p. 145

sarvasvabhavanutpatti (the occurrence of all nature *lit.*),³⁰ according to Candrakirti.³¹ Candrakirti's comments on Pratitya-Samutpada, though etymological in nature, culminate in, "Thus the term pratitya-samutpada. . . conveys the idea of a manifestation of (separate) entities as relative to their causes and conditions. (*Hetu-pratyaya-apeska*)"³² which is the definition, in the major sense, of samsara. In this way, Pratitya-Samutpada is related to nirvana. Pratitya-Samutpada = samsara = nirvana = sýnyata = the absolute, the whole – the ungrounded, indefinable, ultimate, *causeless* reality.

Pratitya-Samutp•da is another way of saying that all is one and our relationship to the whole is in *being* the whole. What seems causal and relative actually is, when seen through the lens of prajna, unified and intergal. Pratitya-Samutp•da is a formula for relating the relative to the absolute in terms of identity, not congruency or contrast.

³⁰ Edgerton, *op. cit.*, pp 125, 583, 615

³¹ Stcherbatsky, *Nirvana, op. cit.*, p. 81

³² *ibid.*, p. 85

Appendix I

Pratitya-Samutpada (The Chain of Interdependent Originations)

<u>Sanskrit Term</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
1. avidya	ignorance
2. samskara	mental formation or compounds
3. vijnana	consciousness (practical knowledge or pattern for being)
4. nama-rupa	name & form (mind & body)
5. sadayanta	sensation (the six senses and their objects)
6. sparsa	contact (of the senses and their objects) [perception]
7. vedana	sensation
8. trishna	(trsn•) desire
9. upadana	prehension <i>or</i> grasping attachment
10. bhava	existence (the threefold states of)
11. jati	birth
12. j•ra-marana	old age – death
soka	sorrow
parideva	lamentation
dukha	misery (pain)
daurmanasya	grief (dejection)
up•y•sa	misery (irritation, mental disturbance, <i>or</i> perturbation)

SOURCES: Alexandra David-Neel, *op. cit.*, p. 43
Franklin Edgerton, *op. cit.*, various

See Alexandra David-Neel for a good elaboration on the Tibetan interpretation of Pratitya-Samutpada: *Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects*, especially Chapter III.

Appendix II

Pratitya-Samutpada: The Words

pratitya – dependent on, based on: *yatha munia pratitya valvajam. . . vartita LV 176.7, cited Siks 238.5 (vs; so read) as, on the basis of munia or valvaja (grasp), a rope is produced. . .* : also in comp. With a following or preceding word, as in pratitya-samutpada, e.v., but in this and some of the following pratitya could be understood as a separate word, as in thee prec. cases, *in dependence: hetu-pratitya-kusalo LV 125.2 (vs), wise in regard to (things that are) dependent on causes;. . .*

pratitya-samutpada – *origination by dependence* of one thing on another; applied to the celebrated 'chain of causation', the (usually twelve) steps. . . from avidya to (a compound ending in) upayasa.

SOURCE: Franklin Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary, op. cit.*, pp 373-4

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