

Buddhist Ethics

The Path to Nirvāna

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2 Origin and Source of Knowledge of the Highest State

THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF THE BUDDHAS

To the Buddhist the origin of the knowledge of the Highest State lies in the Enlightenment of the Buddhas, and the Buddhist's knowledge concerning this is derived from the teaching of Gotama Buddha. That these should be sufficient, if followed sincerely, is evident from the declaration made by Gotama Buddha to his devoted attendant Ānanda shortly before his passing away (*Pari-nibbāna*): 'I have expounded my doctrine throughout, in its entirety, Ānanda; the Tathāgata⁴¹ has not the closed fist of a teacher who holds back something of his Doctrine.'⁴²

Enlightenment consists essentially in knowing things in accordance with reality (*yathābhūtam*). In seeing thus there are no misconceptions or mental projections regarding the appearance of a thing or a course of events; the seeing is entirely clear and according to absolute reality. Gotama Buddha describes the climax of the Buddhist's training, thus: 'He comes to know what, in absolute truth, are the influxes (*āsavas*) (see p. 71), their origin, their cessation, and the way to their cessation. From knowing thus and seeing thus, his mind is freed from the influxes and he knows "I am free." He knows: "Exhausted is birth; the Higher Life has come to perfection; that which should be done has been done; there will be no more of the present state."⁴³

LIFE OF GOTAMA BUDDHA

The historic personage known to Buddhists as 'the Buddha' is

Gotama Śākyamuni. He was born in about the middle of the sixth century BC, probably in the year 566, in Lumbini Park in the neighbourhood of Kapilavastu in the north of the Gorakpur district. A pillar, erected in 239 BC by the emperor Asoka, marks the place of his birth. Both his parents belonged to the Śākya clan, his father being a Chief. Astrologers had foretold that Gotama would become either a world-monarch or a great spiritual leader, and since it was taken for granted that in the latter case he would adopt the homeless life, his parents took every precaution to prevent his coming into contact with any form of unhappiness, surrounding him always with those things which, to them, seemed the best that life could offer. However, at the age of fourteen, one day in his father's garden, he did experience a state of mind in which he became aloof from his surroundings though still maintaining his faculties of observation and application of them.⁴⁴ Many years elapsed before further developments occurred; Gotama married, had a son, and, to all appearances, led an existence suitable to a man of his rank. Then, in spite of all the precautions, he encountered an aged man, a sick man, a corpse, and a man wearing the yellow robe of the wandering mendicant. Appreciating that old age, sickness and death are the lot of mankind, and that there existed persons who aspired to an existence where these did not figure, he resolved that he too would devote himself to finding the truth about life and the cause of all the suffering it entailed.

According to tradition, Gotama was twenty-nine years old when he left his father's house, his wife and child. One night he rode out with a single attendant beyond the city, dismounted, sent his horse back, and himself took to the homeless life of the forest. For some time he studied under famous teachers of the day but always found their doctrines deficient;⁴⁵ the best of them could offer only a temporary, self-induced state of cessation of consciousness, and many relied merely on theorizing. Practising strenuous asceticisms, he became so weak that he was hardly able to stand; then, finding that these served only to dull his thought, he abandoned them. With returning health he came to remember his early experience in his father's garden and to see that the only means of arriving at a solution of man's sufferings lay in his own

meditation. One night he took up his position under the Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*), determined to remain there until he had reached complete understanding.

THE PAṬICCASAMUPPĀDA

Canonical texts vary as to the hour at which Gotama reached this understanding and so became 'enlightened'; the *Udāna* gives in each of its first suttas of the *Bodhivagga*⁴⁶ accounts of the process of reasoning connected with the Enlightenment, identical in every respect except that the first, second and third watches of the night, respectively, are stated as the time of attainment. However, the main importance lies in the facts that the process of reasoning did immediately precede the Enlightenment, and that all the Buddhas attained to their respective Enlightenments by this process. It is known as the *Paṭiccasamuppāda*,⁴⁷ or, more popularly, as the *Nidāna*⁴⁸ Chain or Chain of Dependent Origination.

The *Mahānidāna Suttanta*⁴⁹ contains an account of the *Paṭiccasamuppāda* as delivered by the Buddha, and he goes over it as in the *Mahāpadāna Suttanta*.⁵⁰ As recorded in the latter, the occasion is given as that on which Venerable Ānanda remarked that the *Paṭiccasamuppāda* was easy to understand, the Buddha replying: 'Do not say so, Ānanda; do not speak like that. Deep, indeed, Ānanda, is this *Paṭiccasamuppāda*, and it appears deep too. It is through not understanding this doctrine, through not penetrating it, these beings have become entangled like a matted ball of thread, like a matted bird's nest, like *mūñja* grass and rushes, subject to the round of rebirths (*samsāra*) in a state of suffering.'⁵¹

Nāgārjuna opens the *Mādhyamika-kārikā*, the textbook of the Mādhyamika school by the following dedication:

'The Perfect Buddha.
The foremost of all Teachers I salute;
He has proclaimed
The Principle of Universal Relativity.'⁵²

Indeed, so revered is this doctrine, that the well-known Indian

Mahāyanist scholar Śāntarakṣita offers his adoration to the Buddha in one of his treatises, the *Tatvasaṃgraha* as the 'Great Sage who taught the doctrine of *Paṭiccasamuppāda*'.⁵³

It must be remembered that unlike the majority of other religious philosophies, Buddhism has never given importance to the idea of the first cause, nor indeed to any form of cosmology. Theology did not develop in Buddhism as practical realization is expected of the Bhikkhu and not abstruse disputation. In any case, Buddhism does not recognize a conflict between religion and science as the former is, properly speaking, a practical spiritual application of the principles of the latter.

As the universe comprises the sum total of sentient life, there are, as one would expect, a multiplicity of causes which brought this entity into being. And in this connection, the doctrine of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* recognizes twelve distinct phases, links or divisions (*nidānas*) in the cycle of causation, which, being interdependent, the whole doctrine can be termed that of 'dependent production'.

The abstract formula of the whole sequence of the doctrine has been schematized, showing the logic of it without the contents, as follows:

*'Imasmīṃ sati idaṃ hoti;
imass' uppādā idaṃ uppajjati;
imasmīṃ asati, idaṃ na hoti;
imassa nirodhā imaṃ nirujjhati.'*⁵⁴

'That being thus this comes to be;
from the coming to be of that, this arises;
that being absent, this does not happen;
from the cessation of that, this ceases.'

There is law in this process of causal sequence in which cycle it is impossible to point out a First Cause, simply because it forms a circle — the 'Wheel of Life' (*Bhavacakka*). Most people are accustomed to regard time as a line stretching from a finite past to a finite future. Buddhism, however, views life as a circle and life, reflected as such, is repeated over and over again, an endless continuum. Moreover, the whole series of phases must be taken in

their entirety, the conception of the 'Wheel of Life' being in relation to space and time.

As recorded in the scriptures it is customary to begin the exposition of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* with the factor of (i) Ignorance (*Avijjā*). This ensures the continuation of death and remains a crystallization of the acts one performed during life. Ignorance, therefore, as an antonym of knowledge (*vijjā*) or (*ñāṇa*), leads inevitably to (ii) volitional activities or forces (*sankhārā*) good and bad, or rather wholesome and unwholesome (*kusala akusala*), the effect of which leads to the motive for, or will to, life. These two factors were regarded as the causes of the past.

In the present life, the first stage is (iii) consciousness (*viññāṇa*) of mind or will towards life. When this takes upon itself (iv) material form or mind and body (*nāma-rūpa*), this action constitutes the second step. The third phase soon manifests itself as (v) the six sense organs (*saḷāyatana*), of which (vi) the sense of touch (*phassa*) predominates. The consciousness of the living being rears itself, followed quickly by (vii) feelings (*vedanā*) pleasurable (*sukha*), painful (*dukkha*) or neutral (*adukkham asukha*) associated with seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, bodily and mental impressions.

In these stages, the individual is formed, but he is not entirely responsible for his present condition owing to complex past causes. The first of three causes which will ensure a future life for each individual is (viii) desire (*taṇhā*) which can be neutralized; but if joy, sorrow and the like are experienced, then (ix) attachment (*upādāna*) is produced, which in turn leads to one's clinging to the object of desire. The formation of another, (x) becoming (*bhava*), is ensured; (the latter term is preferable to that of 'existence' as this phase falls midway between this life and the next).

While the individual is enjoying the effects of his past, he is unaware of his creating the conditions for a future life. The whole process may be likened to that of the growth of an ordinary plum-tree: its very existence depends upon fertile soil, a suitable environment and favourable weather; next, after the lapse of a considerable period of time, when at last the tree has reached maturity and is blossoming, the fruit is finally born; but then, in

no time at all, the fruit perishes and dies and the stones drop and are scattered, only to become seeds and produce trees in their turn. In the matter under discussion, therefore, (xi) birth (*jāti*), (xii) decay (*jarā*) and death (*maraṇa*) in themselves constitute the causes for renewed life.

In Buddhism, every stage is a cause (*hetu*) when viewed from its effect (*phala*) and there is nothing rigid or unalterable in this theory. The ignorance that remains after death is regarded as *kamma* — a dynamic manifestation of physical and mental energy. This latent energy is potential action, the motivating force behind the cycle of life. A living being determines his own action and as this cycle has been trodden over innumerable years, no beginning can be seen to this process.

Samsāra, 'Constant Flow', is the sum total of conditioned existence and as such has been likened to an ocean upon which the ripples of the waves denote each life, each one influencing the next. It follows from this analogy, that just as each life can only be influenced by the one preceding, so no outside power, such as a divine being, can possibly trespass and claim property rights!

Before closing the subject, it is noteworthy to recall that there are four kinds of *kamma* with regard to begetting future life: that having immediate effect in this life itself (*dīḥhadhamma-vedanīya*), that having effect in the next succeeding life (*upapajja-vedanīya*), that having effect in some after-life (*aparāpariya-vedanīya*) and that whose effect has completely lost its potential force (*abosi*).

Finally, to sum up: there is only conditioned existence (*sahetudhamma*) with the necessary causes, the factors of which are considered as belonging to every individual. A fundamental doctrine of Buddhism is to regard everything in the universe as dynamic becoming but it is through this becoming that delusion increases and ignorance is prolonged. This fact, as Chandrakīrti says, is in existence everywhere in the universe:

Nothing at all could we perceive
In a universe devoid of causes,
It would be like the colour and the scent
Of a lotus growing in the sky.⁵⁵

As associated directly with the Enlightenment of the Buddha, the declaration of the *Paṭiccasamuppāda* would end with the actual enumeration of the links of the *Nidāna* Chain. This and the realization of other noble doctrines (dhammas) would constitute the aspect of the Enlightenment of the Buddha known as his *Mahāprajñā*, or Great Wisdom. However, before considering the bearings of these on the Buddhist's knowledge of the origin and source of knowledge of the Highest State, there remains, according to the *Mahānidāna Suttanta*, one more corollary declared by Gotama the Buddha in his instruction of Ānanda. This concerns the nature of the 'self'.

THE SELF AND THE ANATTA DOCTRINE

The Buddha gives the current opinions concerning the self as be: (i) My self is small and has material qualities, (ii) My self is limitless and with material qualities, (iii) My self is small⁵⁶ and without material qualities, (iv) My self is limitless and without material qualities. Again there were persons who would make no declaration concerning the self.⁵⁷

The Buddha asks in what respects the self is perceived. It is seen thus: 'Feeling is my self'; 'Feeling is not my self, my self does not experience feeling'; 'Feeling is not my self, my self does not lack experience of feeling'; 'By my self is things felt, the thing that feels is my self.' To those who hold these views that feeling is my self, it should be said that feelings may be happy, unhappy or neutral; any one of these three feelings, while it endures, excludes the other two. All of them are impermanent, conditioned, arising from other relations, things of decay, age, destruction, annihilation. If to a person experiencing any one of them it should seem 'This is my self', then with the passing of that feeling it should also seem to him 'Gone is my self'. A person declaring 'Feeling is my self' is taking for the self impermanence, a mixture of happiness and suffering, a thing coming into existence and dying away, here amongst the things of this world. Therefore the statement 'My self is feeling' is not acceptable.⁵⁸

On the other hand, to a person who declares 'My self does not consist in feeling, my self does not experience feeling', it should be