

Paṭiccasamuppāda

(The Theory of Dependent Origination)

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Paṭiccasamuppāda is the Law of Dependent Origination or conditioned arising. It is applied to explain *dukkha* and *samsāra*, the cycle of birth and death i.e., repeated existence. It is a causal chain with twelve links.

In the Mahānidāna Sutta of the Dīghanikāya, the twelve links are *avijjā* (ignorance), *saṅkhāra* (karma-formations), *viññāṇaṃ* (consciousness), *nāma-rūpaṃ* (mind and matter i.e., mental and physical phenomena), *saḷāyatanaṃ* (six faculties), *phassa* (contact), *vedanā* (sensation), *taṇhā* (desire), *upādānaṃ* (clinging), *bhava* (process of becoming), *jāti* (birth) and *jarā-marāṇa, dukkha domanassa* etc. (decay-death, lamentation, pain etc.).

These twelve links extend over three lives and span them. The first two links belong to the past life, the last two represent the future i.e., rebirth and the rest of the links i.e., eight links from *viññāṇa* to *bhava* represent the present life. Each of the links is an effect of the preceding link which acts as a cause. This means every link of the chain originates depending upon the preceding link and gives rise to the succeeding link. Nothing arises independently; everything has a cause to arise. *Imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti* (this being, that becomes). *Imas's'uppādā idaṃ uppajjati* (from the arising of this, that arises). This law also speaks about the opposite. Nothing happens without a cause. Nothing happens fortuitously. *Imasmiṃ asati idaṃ na hoti* (this not becoming, that does not become), *imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati* (from the ceasing of this, that ceases) i.e., when the cause ceases, the effect also ceases. In the complete absence of a cause, there is no possibility of the arising of an effect.

This law is very deep and profound. Its profundity is clear from what the Buddha says to Ānanda in the Mahānidāna Sutta that although it is profound ‘yet it appears to me as clear as clear’. (See The Great Discourse on Origination, p.223 The Long Discourses of the Buddha by Maurice Walshe, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1995.) The Buddha further says that ‘through not understanding, not penetrating this doctrine, this generation has become like a tangled ball of string, as if covered with a blight, tangled like coarse grass, unable to pass beyond states of woe, the ill destiny, ruin and the round of birth and death.’

In the Mahāpadāna Sutta of the Dīghanikāya, only ten links of the chain are given in backward order from *dukkha*, manifested as old age and death to *viññāna*. This order has been put into the mouth of Vipassi Buddha. But in the Nidāna vagga of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, twelve links of the chain of causation are given—the other two being *avijjā* and *saṅkhāra*.

This law is not based on axioms as the laws are in Euclid's Geometry, nor it is based on intellectual inference of a phenomena happening in the outside world as Newton's laws of gravitation. It is a product of direct experience which person has by looking within oneself with a mind free from all defilements. The laws applicable in Geometry and Physics are different from those of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, as the latter, unlike the former two, apply to the animate world where a person's will is important as it is the driving force. For realizing the truth of these laws, one is required to experiment with them within one's fathom long body and not to experiment in the outside laboratories. Besides, one has to develop one's body and mind i.e., insight and concentration to realize these laws operating within. In short, one has to drive out defilements from one's mind in order to be fit to experience the truth of these laws. For proving the laws of Geometry and gravity, one need not necessarily be a person free from defilements. Persons having defilements like anger, hatred and jealousy can make experiments and prove those laws in the laboratories but they cannot experience how the Laws of Dependent Origination work.

A vipassana practitioner can experience how these laws work. He can see them working in his own fathom long body by developing insight and by remaining equanimous when pleasant and unpleasant sensations arise on his body. In the commentary of the Mahāsaccaka Sutta, development of body means insight, because a vipassana practitioner is not overwhelmed by the experience of pleasant feelings through his development of insight and when unpleasant feelings arise, he is not overwhelmed because he has developed concentration of mind and is able to escape from it.

For developing one's body and mind, one purifies one's conduct and livelihood by following five precepts. Besides, one develops contentment, restraint of the sense faculties and *sati* and *sampajañña* which internalize the process of purification and thereby bridge the transition from virtue to concentration. These two enable him to attain *paññā* so that he has what is called the knowledge and vision of reality as it is—*yathābhūtañāna dassana*.

Unless a person walks on the Noble Eightfold Path shown by the Buddha, it is not possible for him to understand the truth of *paṭiccasamuppāda*.

It is on account of this that an intellectual understanding of this law will not produce the desired result. One may explain *paṭiccasamuppāda* very clearly from the intellectual point of view but unless one experiences it, unless one sees how each link of this chain is caused by the preceding link and unless one sees at the experiential level that even pleasant sensations are ephemeral and do not give lasting pleasure, one cannot develop non-attachment and end suffering. There is another difference between the laws that apply to the physical world and those that apply to the moral spiritual world. It is not possible for anyone to annihilate the gravitational force. A mango will fall down from a tree, it cannot go up but one can annihilate desires. He can even stop them from arising. Desires ordinarily overpower one but one can overpower them and root them out completely if he understands the working of this law.

Unlike Euclid's geometrical laws and Newton's gravitational laws, the laws of *paṭiccasamuppāda* are moral laws based on psychology, ethics and metaphysics. These laws, therefore, have great spiritual implication in the philosophy propounded by the Buddha. The second noble truth propounded by him says that *taṇhā* (desire) is the cause of suffering. It implies that suffering is not permanent. Remove the cause and the suffering will automatically come to an end. The teachings of the Buddha are not pessimistic as they are made out to be by some, but they hold hopes for humankind. The fourth noble truth is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. This path is called the middle path because it avoids the two extremes of hedonism and asceticism. It has eight constituents that form the action plan as to how to live the philosophy of the Buddha. This Noble Eightfold Path consists of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. *Sīla* means purity of physical and vocal actions, *samādhi* is the one-pointedness of wholesome mind. The mind can be wholesome when it is free from defilements. With this pure, undefiled and concentrated mind, one can attain wisdom and will be able to see reality as it is. As one's darkness of ignorance will be expelled by the light of one's wisdom, one will be able to break the cycle of existence which causes one endless suffering. *Papañca* (skt. *prapañca*), equivalent to Schopenhauer's 'world', will cease. No world of suffering will come into being as explained by Will Durant in his book *The Story of Philosophy*.

The Noble Eightfold Path happily and harmoniously combines psychology, ethics and metaphysics. *Sīla* is ethics. One can observe ethical precepts like abstinence from killing, lying, etc. when one is not under the influence of craving, aversion and ignorance. *Samādhi* (concentration of mind) is not possible without understanding the fickle and unsteady nature of mind and without purifying it from various defilements which is possible by observing *sīla* (moral precepts). This is psychology. When one attains *paññā* (insight, wisdom), he understands reality as it is. The realization of its impermanent nature which comes under metaphysics makes us detached.

The Buddha's (in fact Siddhārtha's) spiritual quest was primarily concerned with finding a way to end ubiquitous suffering. Physical and mental suffering is experienced by all, although not as sensitively as it was experienced by the Buddha. He also experienced that aspect of suffering which is the root cause of the aforementioned modes of suffering. It is that suffering which causes one to be born again and again and suffer endlessly. Siddhārtha was concerned with ending that suffering—the root of all kinds of suffering. And what is the root cause of all suffering? It is being born with five aggregates.

As described in the Ariyapariyesanā Sutta, he left home for seeking the noble (*nibbāna*), its opposite—the ignoble being (the ubiquitous suffering that humankind is subject to). Greatly sensitive as he was, he immediately learned that it was ridiculous to seek those things which, like him, were subject to birth, old age, defilement, disease and death. Even a beautiful woman, who inflames one's passion and desire, is subject to old age, disease and death, let alone other material wealth like cows, goats, sheep, silver and gold which also do not last forever. How can those things which are not permanent give one lasting happiness? And how can one, who is also subject to change, enjoy lasting happiness?

To be infatuated with those impermanent things, to be attached to them when all is constantly changing is ignoble. This analytical thinking led him to see the danger in all things subject to birth, ageing, sickness etc. and to seek the ageless, deathless, sorrowless and undefiled supreme security from bondage of suffering, *nibbāna*.

Two teachers, Ālārakālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, to whom he went to learn how to end suffering and how to be free from the cycle of birth and death, could not satisfy him. In fact, Uddaka Ramaputta was not as efficient a teacher as his father Rama was, so in his *āśrama* Siddhārtha learned the eighth *jhāna*

all by himself. It is true he learned the *samatha* type of meditation there, realized it and attained its knowledge and vision. As a consequence, this could ensure his happy life for thousands of aeons in the higher worlds but could not show him the path to root out all *kilesas* (mental impurities) that cause suffering. *Samatha* meditation only helps one to keep out external objects impinging on one's senses causing sensations which give rise to desire and attachment. But how can one annihilate desires which keep on arising within one's own self all the time? The future Buddha could see two dangers. One was from outside when one's sense organs come in contact with their respective objects. One sees with his eyes a visible object, contemplates upon its desirability and develops desire to have it. When this desire is not fulfilled, he suffers. The other danger was from within. There was a stock of *anusaya kilesas* (dormant mental impurities) deep within one's unconscious mind. They also come on the surface. This is a psychological fact that any thought arising in the mind manifests itself through sensations on the body as said by the Buddha—*Vedanāsamōsaranā sabbe dhammā*. They are either pleasant or unpleasant. One hankers after pleasant ones and hates the unpleasant ones. Because pleasant sensations do not last forever suffering is caused; suffering is also caused because of aversion towards unpleasant sensations.

The Bodhisatta was primarily concerned with discovering a way to end suffering. While looking for the way, he had learned how suffering is caused.

So, when he went to Uruvelā with a great resolve to practice austere penances to discover a way to end suffering, three similes, never heard before, flashed across his mind. The similes related to a wet sappy piece of wood lying in water, to another piece of wood lying on dry land away from water and to a third dry sapless piece of wood lying on dry land far away from water. Howsoever a person may try to produce fire by rubbing the first two pieces of wood with an upper fire-stick, this person will become tired and disappointed not being able to produce fire and heat. Why? Because those pieces of wood are wet and sappy. Only a dry piece of wood rubbed against another dry piece of wood can produce fire and heat.

This was a sort of 'eureka' for the Bodhisatta who was going to be the Buddha. He came to the conclusion that whether good *samaṇas* and *Brahmaṇas* feel or do not feel painful racking and piercing feelings due to exertion, they are incapable of knowledge and vision and supreme enlightenment because they do not live bodily and mentally withdrawn from sensual pleasures. Wet and sappy piece of wood stands for people who are full of sensual desires. So as

long as sensual desires are there, it is impossible to attain peace and happiness, let alone the highest good i.e., *nibbāna*.

With these three apt and relevant similes, he underlines the importance of becoming bodily and mentally free from sensual desires before he can end suffering and aspire for the greatest good i.e., *nibbāna* – a state of desirelessness.

Finding austere penances worthless, he did not lose heart. The million-dollar question before him was how to discover a path to end suffering. So, he once again concentrated his mind and applied it to look within. In other words, he started practicing *vipassana*. This technique of meditation made it clear to him how desire, the cause of suffering, arises and how it can be eradicated. In a flash, as it were, he saw how mind works, how it reacts under the old habit pattern and how it multiplies miseries. He also saw how suffering can be ended by reversing the working process of the mind. It is here that the law of *paṭiccasamuppāda* became crystal clear to him.

One can thus say that this Law of Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) holds good in the spiritual world. It explains how *dukkha* comes into being and how it can be eradicated. Thus, it explains *papañca* (expansion or development of *dukkha* or the coming into being of the cycle of birth and death). But how to stop this *papañca* and get rid of *dukkha* was the million-dollar question before the would-be Buddha.

He thought unless he knew the real nature of desires and where they arise, he could not end them. This made him look within. And while looking within, this Law of Dependent Origination became crystal clear. Looking within to see what happens there is *vipassana*. The *samatha* type of meditation enables a meditator to attain concentration of mind and to keep outside objects that come in contact with the sense organs at bay. But *vipassana* helps the meditator to see clearly how pleasant or unpleasant sensations arise in the body, which one either wishes to continue or discontinue. In both the cases there is a desire, which when frustrated, causes suffering. Pleasant sensations do not continue and are replaced by unpleasant ones giving rise to suffering.

Sensation is *vedanā* and it became clear to the would-be Buddha that *vedanā* gives rise to *taṇhā*. How does it produce *taṇhā*? The Bodhisatta examined his own mind and saw that broadly speaking, it consisted of four processes:

viññāṇa (consciousness), *saññā* (perception), *vedanā* (sensation) and *saṅkhāra* (reaction). When any phenomenon, say the eye coming in contact with any visible object, occurs then consciousness simply registers it. The second process, perception, recognizes it and evaluates it either positively, negatively or neutrally in the light of one's past experience. Perception, thus, gives rise to sensation which is either pleasant, unpleasant or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. It is here that *taṇhā* arises because one wants to have more of pleasant sensations and none of unpleasant ones. One's reaction to have more of the pleasant and none of the unpleasant sensations causes suffering because even pleasant sensations are not permanent. All sensations, pleasant or unpleasant, arise to pass away. The Bodhisatta saw this very clearly. Thus *aniccā* (impermanence) became crystal clear to him. He realized it.

The future Buddha saw the process of the origin of suffering very clearly. Because of the five physical senses such as eye, ear, etc. and the mind, our contact with the countless phenomena, namely sights, sounds, odors, flavors, textures, various thoughts and emotions becomes inevitable. Contact gives rise to sensation—*phassa paccayā vedanā*. One likes to have more pleasant sensations and hates to have the unpleasant ones. Thus, desires are caused—*vedanā paccayā taṇhā*. *Taṇhā* becomes stronger and stronger producing *upādānaṃ*—*taṇhā paccayā upādānaṃ*. Strong desire (*upādāna*) produces *bhava* (becoming) which causes *jāti* (birth). *Upādāna paccaya bhava* and *bhava paccaya jāti*.

The future Buddha, while looking within, i.e., while practicing *vipassana* must have made a beginning from there. Any serious meditator who concentrates his mind and develops *sati* (awareness) and *sampajañña* (thorough understanding) must make a beginning from there. Then, one will very clearly and sharply see different kinds of sensations arising and passing away. The more one sees their impermanent nature, the less one craves for them. One begins to develop detachment. Why have an attachment even for pleasant sensations that are only fleeting?

When the future Buddha came to see the process of how suffering arises, he went deeper to see how it can be ended. He concluded that it can be ended by eliminating desires. This was a second 'eureka' for him, a 'eureka' with higher wisdom. Wisdom dawned upon him. He now knew that the things he desired are impermanent. Up till now he was ignorant. He did not know their real nature. So, he looked back and saw that up till now what he did was because of

his ignorance. Thus, he came to know the first link, ignorance (*avijjā*), of the chain of causation.

But how to eliminate suffering? Concentrating more on the process of origin of suffering, the Bodhisatta saw that the only way to eliminate desires, the cause of suffering, is to not feel sensations as pleasant or unpleasant but to remain equanimous. In other words, one should not react to them. If one remains equanimous, desires arise and pass away. When there is craving for pleasant sensations to continue and for unpleasant ones to stop, one multiplies one's miseries. But once one knows their real nature, one is on the way to develop non-attachment to the sensations. A meditator can do this by cultivating *sati* (awareness) and *sampajañña* (thorough understanding). *Sati* helps to feel sensations moment after moment and *sampajañña* enables the meditator to feel its impermanence. The two together help one to develop *nirveda* (non-attachment). This is how suffering can be extirpated. How *vipassana* can help one eliminate desires has been explained in my article entitled 'Mechanism of Vipassana' published in the book *Aspects of Buddha-Dhamma*.

There is no other effective way to end suffering. The only effective way is to practice *vipassana* and cultivate equanimity. It is not possible to destroy the objects of the five physical senses and the objects of mind. Nor is it possible to destroy the six bases of sensory organs. They will be there and the sensations which they produce will inevitably come in contact with their respective sense organs. The world is full of thorns. One cannot clear all of them from the path. The best way for one to protect oneself is to wear a pair of shoes as beautifully said by Confucius, the Chinese philosopher. Similarly, the best way not to cause and multiply one's miseries is to not react to sensations but to remain equanimous. And this is possible by understanding the impermanent nature of sensations. Continuous practice of *vipassana* strengthens *bhāvanāmayā paññā* (wisdom developing from direct, personal experience), which enables one to see reality face to face and ultimately no trace of darkness remains.

How to practice *vipassana*? This becomes clear if one remembers what the Buddha said about producing fire. The two pieces of dry wood should be continuously rubbed together to produce heat and fire. If they are rubbed off and on, fire cannot be produced. *Vipassana* should be continuously practiced to see *aniccā* (impermanence) and develop *nirveda* (non-attachment). Continuity of practice is the key to success.

One can know *aniccā* by practicing *vedanānupassanā*, one of the four *anupassanās* described in detail in the Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Sutta, the other three being *kāyānupassanā*, *cittānupassanā* and *dhammānupassanā*. These four *anupassanās* are practiced to establish our mindfulness.

Vipassana led the Bodhisatta to see that if sensations are left unobserved, the desires caused by them grow stronger and stronger and cause more suffering. But if sensations, which are the causes of desires, are observed mindfully, their real nature is known. Once their impermanent nature is known at the experiential level, one is less likely to crave for them. This is how *vipassana* is a very effective means of eliminating desires.

Just as the Bodhisattva saw this process of the origin of suffering and how it can be ended very clearly and became the Buddha, any serious meditator of *vipassana* can experience the truth of what the Buddha says about the origin of suffering and how it can be eliminated. One can realize the chain of causation and see its different links.

Vipassana meditation helps a meditator to experience the transitory nature of body and mind. In the process of investigation of the ultimate reality of mind and matter, one discovers that whenever a defilement arises in the mind, two types of changes take place at the physical level. When one is angry, the breath does not remain normal and smooth. It becomes rough. The other change is more subtle in nature. It is bio-chemical. It is a sensation. A meditator is taught in a ten-day course to observe both respiration and sensation. Both can be made to act as warning signals if he mindfully observes them. What happens is that most of the time one is not aware of the negativity arising in him and as a result reacts blindly and is overpowered by it. Meditators who have been taught to observe their breath and sensation have at least a few occasions when they clearly see them and stop reacting blindly. This practice of mindful observation goes a long way in making two things clear. When any negativity arises in one, one's breath is not normal and one feels different kinds of sensations. The second thing a meditator learns, at the experiential level, is that sensations are impermanent. This eventually leads one to develop detachment and to remain equanimous. By remaining detached, one cuts down one's desires and by remaining equanimous, one does not multiply one's miseries.

A *vipassana* meditator trains in *sīla* (morality) before being able to concentrate the mind. By observing *sīla*, one promotes the purification of conduct and

livelihood. Right speech, right action and right livelihood purify one's conduct and livelihood. Then the meditator begins to concentrate the mind by observing the incoming and outgoing breath. In this process, the mind wanders but with right effort, one brings it back and develops right mindfulness and right concentration. This, the meditator does again and again. This is called right effort with *bhāvanāmayā paññā*. This makes one's mind sharp and concentrated. With this mind, one begins to observe different sensations arising on the body. With the cultivation of two powerful tools—*sati* and *sampajañña*, one develops the knowledge of *aniccā* (*aniccā ñāṇa*). With this direct knowledge, one develops *nirveda* (non-attachment).

The link *vedanā*, therefore, is the most important in the chain of causation. Here, one stands at a place where the road forks. If one reacts to sensations, one multiplies one's misery. But if a meditator learns to observe the impermanent nature of sensations and does not react and remains equanimous, that meditator is on the path to develop wisdom. *Saññā* (perception) is gradually going to be replaced by *paññā* (wisdom).

While practicing *vipassana* meditation, a meditator first begins to observe respiration. By being mindful, one also observes the changes that it undergoes. One also sharply notices how changes are brought about. This observation helps one concentrate one's mind. With this concentrated and focused mind, one looks within and sees what sensations are produced when some negativity like anger, hatred etc. arises in the mind. One also experiences how one burns when negativities arise in him. This, a meditator realizes, is undesirable. Who wants to burn? When pleasant sensations arise and one likes to have more of them, one is disappointed to see that they are also impermanent. This experience of *aniccā* tears away the veil of ignorance and one begins to have a good understanding of this law.

Paṭiccasamuppāda can be explained in four ways. Either you begin from *avijjā* and go up to *dukkha domanassa* etc. or you begin from *vedanā* and go up to *dukkha* etc. or you begin from the end i.e., *dukkha domanassa* and trace it to *avijjā* or you begin from *vedanā* and go up to *avijjā*.

While practicing *vipassana*, it is best to begin from *vedanā* and realize its different links. It has been explained here how *vedanā* gives rise to *taṇhā*, *taṇhā* causes *upādāna*, *upādāna* causes *bhava* and *bhava* causes *jāti*, *jarā dukkha*, *domanassa*, *soka* etc. So, the chain from *vedanā* to *dukkha* becomes

clear. But the question is why does one have *vedanā*? What causes *vedanā*? Going deep within, a meditator can see that *vedanā* is caused by *phassa* (contact) which means when the contact of a sense organ with its respective object happens. Not only concrete objects like those which are visible and audible cause contact but thoughts also produce contact. And contact is possible because of *nāma* and *rūpa* which one is endowed with. The flow of *nāma* and *rūpa* is caused by consciousness i.e., *paṭisandhi viññāṇa*. Going deep, he can see that consciousness is caused by reaction called *saṅkhāra* (*skt. saṃskāra*). What is *saṅkhāra*? It is the deed (*kamma*) that one does with volition. But one does these deeds in ignorance. One's blind liking and disliking without understanding the real nature of things causes *saṅkhāra*. And why does one react? Because one is ignorant of the nature of reality that one reacts to. So, one concludes that *avijjā* is the first link to set in motion this process of causation. One has been reacting blindly since time immemorial and it has become one's habit pattern to do so, to react. A practitioner of *vipassana* can come out of this habit pattern by observing respiration and sensation mindfully and having thorough understanding of the impermanent nature of what one desires and what one reacts to.

The practice of *vipassana*, therefore, has a two-fold function. It not only makes one mentally and bodily pure—as one walks on the Noble Eightfold Path, observing *sīla* and practicing *samādhi*—but also makes one fit to see how suffering is caused and how it can be rooted out by attaining *paññā*.

Thus, all twelve links of *paṭiccasamuppāda* that cause a person to move in the cycle of birth and death become clear. And it also becomes clear how a person can reverse this process and end suffering forever.

Questions:

1. Explain *paṭiccasamuppāda*. What are its 12 links? Enumerate them.
2. What does the Buddha mean when he says *paṭiccasamuppāda* is very deep? Explain.
3. The twelve links of *paṭiccasamuppāda* extend over three lives and span them. Explain.
4. *Imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti, imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati*. Expand.
5. Where can the Law of Dependent Origination be experienced and who can experience it?
6. How is *vedanā* the most important link in the chain of causation? Explain in detail.

7. What is *avijjā*? Why does it occupy the first position in the chain of causation?
8. Explain *vedanā paccayā taṇhā*.
9. What is *vipassana*? How can its practice enable one to see how suffering is caused and how it can be eliminated?
10. Explain *sati* and *sampajañña*.
11. What is *bhāvanāmayā paññā*?
12. How is the Law of Dependent Origination different from physical and chemical laws? Expound.