

Chapter - III

THE CONCEPT OF CAUSALITY IN BUDDHISM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MILINDA PRASNA

In the worldly process we perceive a constant change. Some of it is seemingly automatic i.e., without the efforts of some perceptible agent, e.g., the snows of the mountains melt into the water of the rivers and run towards the sea; the sun shines brightly, spreads heat and light and repels cold and darkness. This change is sometimes due to some efforts of perceptible agent, e.g., a potter turns the clay into a pot with the help of his stick and wheel.

A layman does not bother much about change. If he is asked regarding this question, he will definitely search for some causes. This layman's conception when reflected upon, confronts us with serious difficulties. The importance of the concept is twofold - metaphysical and logical. Is all Reality intrinsically active, e.g., the prakṛti of Sāṅkhya, or is it intrinsically passive? It is known that the atoms of Nyāya - Vaiśeṣika, is acted upon due to the interference of some other active agency. These questions are intimately connected with the change,

and therefore, with the concept of causation. Science, now-a-days is able to dispense with cause. Bertrand Russell, for instance, has declared the concept of cause as a 'relic of bygone age'. Thus the concept of cause is used, in the name of "functional dependence".

Causation in western philosophy is found in Aristotle's philosophy, who has drawn upon four different kinds of causes e.g. (i) Material cause (ii) Formal cause (iii) Efficient cause and (iv) Final cause.

According to J.S. Mill, causation is co-extensive with human experience, but it cannot be said to be strictly true, because, in many cases, we do not actually perceive causes for so many changes, we only infer the causes on the basis of other causal connections. Uniformity of causation is relatively recent in philosophy. It has come into effect with the development and the growth of science and its emphasis on the law of nature¹.

In the western concept of causality the efficient cause plays a vital role. They have neglected the material cause. But when we come to the Indian treatment of causation we have seen a separate picture. Their main subject of treatment is the material cause and this material cause appears differently in different systems of Indian Philosophy.

In Sāṅkhya, the material cause is the permanent basis of

changing states which are real Prakṛti of Sāṅkhya, constitutes the material cause of the whole universe, which is active. In Advaita Vedānta, the material cause is the permanent basis of the changing states which are not real, but appeared as real due to illusion. It is the substratum of the whole illusory universe. The conception of the material cause of Vedānta is parallel to the immanent causality of the Western thought.²

The main problem discussed by Indian thinkers is that of the relation of the material cause with its effect. Is the essence then derived from void ? Is it annihilated or continues to exist side by side ? In the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika conception of causality an effect is completely a new entity with its essence different from that of its inherent cause and exists side by side with it.

The real emphasis of the Buddha's teaching lay in the doctrine of causation as pervading all the things of experience which creates a new and Copernican revolution of thought.

In order to maintain the continuity of the world in the absence of a permanent substratum, Buddha announces the Law of causation and makes it the basis of continuity. The Law of universal causation, with its corollary of the eternal continuity of becoming, is the fundamental contribution of Buddhism to Indian thought. Buddha and Upaniṣads holds the same opinion that the whole world is conditioned

by causes. Upaniṣads hold that the things have no self-existence as such, but are products of a causal series which has no beginning or end. Buddha says things are the products of conditions. That which constitutes being in the material realm of things is only the *paticcasamuppāda* (*Pratītyasamutpāda*) or the origin of one thing in dependence on another. We cannot say as in the Nyāya philosophy that one thing is the cause of something else. As the world process is affiliated to conscious growth, so is the force of causality related to inner motivation. Organic growth is the type of all becoming. The difficulty of external world is that the causation becomes uniform antecedent. That is the cause, given which another occurs. Causation is not defined in more adequate terms in modern philosophy.

Before going to discuss the Buddhist concept of causality and its philosophical importance as discussed by Nāgasena to the king Milinda, we may quote the words of Kamalaśīla. "Among all the jewels of Buddhist philosophy its theory of causation is the chief jewel." Dr. L.M. Joshi has mentioned that the two principles *Pratītya - samutpāda* and *Nirvāṇa* form the core of the Buddha's philosophy. *Pratītya - samutpāda* was also called the middle way (*Madyamā pratipad*).³

The theory of causation is contained in the Second Noble Truth, which gives us the cause of suffering, and in the Third Noble Truth

which shows the cessation of suffering. Suffering is *Samsāra*; cessation of suffering is *Nirvāṇa*. Both are only aspects of the same Reality. *Pratītya samutpāda*, viewed from the point of view of relativity is *samsāra*; while viewed from the point of view of reality, it is *Nirvāṇa*. It is relativity and dependent causation as well as the Absolute, for it is the Absolute itself which appears as relative and acts as the binding thread giving them unity and meaning.⁴ *Pratītya samutpāda* tells us that in the empirical world dominated by the intellect everything is relative, conditional, dependent, subject to birth and death and therefore impermanent. The causal formula is : "This being, that arises"⁵ i.e., 'Depending on the cause, the effect arises'. Thus every object of thought is necessarily relative. And because it is relative, it is neither absolutely real nor absolutely unreal. All phenomenal things hang between reality and nothingness, avoiding both the extremes. *They are like the appearances of the Advaita Vedāntic Avidyā or Māyā*. Lord Buddha identifies the Law : "He who sees the *Dharma* sees the *Pratītya samutpāda*, and he who sees the *Pratītya samutpāda*, sees the *Dharma*". Failure to grasp it is the cause of misery. Its knowledge leads to the cessation of misery. Nāgārjuna salutes Buddha as the best among the teachers, who taught the blessed doctrine of *Pratītya Samutpāda* which leads to the cessation of plurality and to bliss.⁶ Kamalasīla says that the "doctrine of *Pratītya samutpāda* forms the most important factor in the excellent teaching

of the blessed Lord". It envelopes into it not only the theory of causation, but also the most important doctrine of Buddhist philosophy - the doctrines of the universal flux, the doctrine of unconnected flow of momentary reality and the doctrine of *Śūnya-Vāda*. It is the inexorable law that forms the basis of the whole of universe and controls all the origination and destruction of both sentient and insentient beings.

The meaning of *Patīccasamuppāda* is 'arising on the grounds of a preceding cause'. It is the causal chain of causation. Writers have given different expression such as '*Dependent Origination*' or 'Dependent Arising' or 'Conditioned Co-production' or 'Conditioned Genesis' etc. Three formulas are given by Stcherbatsky which disclose the meanings and implications of the Buddhist theory of Causation, the *Pratītya samutpāda*. The first is "this being", that appears, the second is, "there is no real production, there is only interdependence," and the third is "all elements are forceless". The full meanings of the formulas can be grasped only in contrast to the thesis of the other schools existing at the times with which Buddhism had to fight. The *Satkāryavāda* of Sāṅkhya holds that there was no new production, no creative causation, but just a manifestation of the already existing stuff. The *asatkāryavāda* of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas holds that the effect is something new, not existing in the self of the cause. But the Buddhist answer was that the effect is not from one's own self, not from another self, not haphazard are the things produced. A thing is, in fact, not

produced at all; it arises in functional dependence upon its causes. The third formula refutes the idea of instrumental causation which is not possible in Buddhism where reality is only instantaneous and has no time to exert force on some other thing.⁷

Allied to the concept of dependent origination is the concept of impermanence or change. Cause and effect are interlinked. But how long does the cause exist ? It is not eternal. If it is eternal then it cannot produce something else called the effect, so cause is temporary, nay momentary. Every minute we see thousands of causes and effects. The effect then transforms itself into a cause and produces another effect. The transformation of cause into effect and vice-versa is an endless process.

Buddhism may be described as having reached in those early days to the modern conception of causation.

The view that everything changes from moment to moment is known as the *Kṣaṇika-vāda* or doctrine of momentariness; and it is by that term that Buddhism is commonly alluded to in Hindu philosophical works.

Everything is momentary. Nothing is permanent. Body, sensation, perception, disposition, consciousness, all these are impermanent and sorrowful. There is neither being nor not-being, but only becoming. Reality is a stream of becoming. Life is a series of

manifestation of becoming. There is no 'thing' which changes; only ceaseless change goes on. Everything is merely a link in the chain, a spoke in the wheel, a transitory phase in the series. Everything is conditional, dependent, relative, *Pratīya samutpanna*. Everything is subject to birth and death, to production and destruction, to creation and decay. There is nothing, human or divine, that is permanent. To quote the excellent words of Shelley :

*"Worlds or worlds are rolling ever,
From creation to decay,
Like the bubbles on a river,
Sparkling, bursting, borne away."*⁸

'Everything is sorrow; everything is devoid of self; everything is momentary. Heraclitus said that we cannot bathe twice into the same river. Hume said, 'I never can catch "myself". Whenever I try, I stumble on this or that perception'. William James said, 'The passing thought itself is the thinker'. Bergson said, 'Everything is a manifestation of the flow of *E'lan Vital*'. A river is not the same river the next moment. A river is only a continuous flow of different waters. Similarly a flame is not one and the same flame. It is a series of different flames. The rapidity of succession preserves continuity which is not broken. Similarity is mistaken as identity. The so-called 'same

flame' is only a succession of so many similar flames, each flame lasting for a moment. The fact that a flame is a series of so many similar flames can easily be noticed when in a hurricane lantern, due to some defect, the succession of flames is obstructed and one flame succeeds another after a slight interval. Identity, therefore, is nothing but continuity of becoming. The seed becomes the tree through different stages. A new born baby becomes old man through different stages. Rapidity of succession gives rise to the illusion of unity. 'Just as a chariot wheel in rolling rolls only at one point; of the tyre, and in resting rests only at one point; in exactly the same way the life of a living being lasts only for the period of one thought. As soon as that thought has ceased the living being is said to have ceased'.⁹ 'The wheel of the cosmic order goes on without maker, without beginning'.¹⁰ Buddha avoided the extremes of eternalism and nihilism.

The principle impermanence and no-self are fundamental to the teaching of Buddha : and by emancipating them he may be said to have reverted at the same time both the truth of the traditional teaching and the belief of the common people. The unique doctrine starts by postulating certain elements as basic which are mutually and which include both the physical and the psychical and explains the whole world as produced out of them.

All existence is impermanent. It means becoming. All becoming is subject to the law of causation. Law of causation is the production

of an effect out of a complement of cause and conditions. The effect emerges from the destruction of cause and conditions.¹¹ A seed is the cause of a plant. The soil, water, light etc. which promote the growth of the plant are its conditions. So, a *hetu* is the principal cause and a *paccaya* is a concomitant condition. The Law of Dependent Origination is endless. Causation is dynamic, not static. A cause never perishes but only changes as a jar is made from clay.

Prātitya (*Prati+i+tya*) means after reaching (*Prāpya*) or depending on (*apekṣya*) and *sammā* means a right, *utpāda* means arising. Combining all these we get 'depending causes' rightly.

The Dependent Origination brings out the basic principles of knowledge and wisdom. From this we get the twelve links of the causal wheel of dependent origination.

(1) Ignorance (2) impression (3) consciousness (4) mind and matter (5) six organs of sense (6) contact (7) feeling (8) desire (9) attachment (10) existence (11) birth (12) old age and death. This is the wheel of life revolving day after day, from birth to death and death to birth. This is the twelve spoked wheel of Dependent Origination. This is the vicious circle of causation. It does not end with death. Death is only a beginning of a new life. It is called *Bhava-cakra*, *Samsāra-cakra*, *Jarā-maraṇa-cakra*, *Dharma-cakra*, *Prātitya-samutpāda-cakra* etc.

An analysis of these twelve links shows their psychological significance. It is important to note that life is not a blind play of mechanical nature, but as due to the internal urge, the life force, the *e'lan vital*, the will to be born. Everything that lives also dies. When the cause disappears the effect also disappears. Things that appear permanent are in reality temporary. They will also pass away. What appears to have reached the highest point of glory is bound to fall. Where there is a beginning there is also the end.

The world is an endless process. Monarchy, social tyranny, slavery, inequality-all are temporary. They will pass away and something else will come. As day succeeds night, the new succeeds the old. This is the law of the world. This idea of continuous change is clearly brought out by the Buddhist Monk Nāgasena, in his discourse with King Milinda, who is no other than the Greek king Menander.

The king asked Nāgasena, "Does he the same person who is born ?" Nāgasena replied to the question, neither the same nor another. He explained it with an illustration that the king was once a baby, a tender thing and small in size lying flat on his back. The king was not the same as he has now grown up. Everyday we are new and yet not quite new. There is persistent continuity as well as unceasing change (*Milinda Pañha*)¹².

In the same *Milinda Pañha*, there is another illustration where

Nāgasena gives the example of a candle that burns from evening till morning and concludes that the chain of element is joined together. One element is always coming into being, another is always ceasing and passing away. Without beginning, without end, the change continues. Buddha also used the simile of fire and a continuous flow of water to prove his idea of change. It may compel us to recall the idea of famous Greek dialectician, Heraclitus, who also used the simile of flowing water to prove that the world is a process of continuous change.¹³

In the process of 'life', it is the result of man's thoughts in the past and this present thought will condition his future lives. A dead depends upon a thought, in fact, it is the manifestation of thought. His thought in the past is the condition for his present vision at any given moment. In order to arrest the life continuum he must seek the cause and its relation, so that he would be free from the cycles of births and deaths. The law of dependent origination is the central point in Buddha's logic. Whatever exists arises from causes and conditions and is in every respect impermanent. The cause does not live in the effect but ceases the moment the effect comes into being. Rahul Sankrityayan says, "Buddha's pratitya is such a cause as is always seen to be vanishing in the very moment before the birth of a thing or an event". The words 'dependent origination' do not accurately reflect

the sense of the words *pratītya-samutpāda*. It means when one thing vanishes or perishes, another is born. Change in the Buddhist conception is replacement of one entity by another; it is a series of entities emerging and perishing in entirety; one entity does not become another.¹⁴

This is the metaphysician's mode of reasoning. "For him a thing either exists, or it does not exist, it is equally impossible for a thing to be itself and at the same time something else. Positive and negative absolutely exclude one another; cause and effect stand in an equally rigid antithesis one to the other". For Buddha, cause and effect are rigidly opposed to each other. Hence a thing ceases every moment instead of ceasing and not ceasing at the same time. Hence the universal and the particular are rigidly opposed to each other. There are only particulars and no universals.

"The Buddhist holds that all existence is particular; the universal is a thought-construct or *Vikalpa*". "Man is only a conventional name for a collection of different constituents, the material body, the immaterial mind, the formless consciousness, just as a chariot is a collection of wheels, axles, shafts etc". Human consciousness continues from one life into another but the objective reality perishes in the moment. Since the succession of entities is not a continuous but discontinuous stream.¹⁵

Since only the particulars exist, "There are as many things as there are distinguishable 'parts' or aspect". Even this part or thing is "not only an instant lacking duration, but also a spatial point lacking all magnitude and diversity as well". Further : "By the same logic we are led to the denial of the universal or identical aspect of things. Each entity is discrete and unique". "There is neither flow nor movement in each entity nor in the series; it is the spectator who projects that into the several static entities".

The principle of Dependent origination explains the exact manner in which *bhava* (existence) takes place. It asserts that given anything there is also given something else which is its necessary and sufficient condition. The essential intention of *Paṭiccasamuppāda* was the purely negative one of denying the independent existence or reality of finite things. *Paṭiccasamuppāda* as the Middle way - It is not nihilistic, and emphatically denied the total unreality of things. The theory of *Karma* is based on this, being an implication of the law of causation. Our present life is due to the impressions of the *Karmas* of the past life and it will shape our future life. Ignorance and *Karma* go on determining each other in a vicious circle. Again, the theory of Momentariness (*kṣaṇa-bhaṅga-vāda*) is also a corollary of Dependent Origination. Because things depend on their causes and conditions, because things are relative, dependent, conditional and finite, they

must be momentary. To say that a thing arises depending on its cause is to admit that it is momentary, for when the cause is removed the thing will cease to be. That which is not permanent is momentary. The theory of No-Ego (*nairātmyavāda*), the theory that the Individual ego is ultimately false is also based on this doctrine. When everything is momentary, the ego is also momentary and therefore relative and false.

The Doctrine of Causal Connection of Early Buddhism

It is indeed difficult to be definite as to what the Buddha actually wished to mean by this cycle of dependence of existence sometimes called *Bhavacakra* (wheel of existence). Decay and death (*Jarāmaraṇa*) could not have happened if there was no birth.

The word *bhava* is not found in the earlier *Upaniṣads* and was used in the Pāli scriptures for the first time as a philosophical term. There could not have been a previous existence if people had not been taken themselves to things or works they desired. This betaking oneself to actions or things in accordance with desire is called *upādāna*. As this betaking to the thing depends upon desire (*trṣṇā*), it is said that there may be *upādāna* there must be *taṇhā*. Neither the word *upādāna* nor *Trṣṇā* (the Sanskrit word corresponding to *taṇhā*)

is found in the earlier Upaniṣads, but the ideas contained in them are similar to the words "*kratu*" and "*Kāma*". Desire (*taṇhā*) is then said to depend on feeling. *Nāma-rūpa* (name and form) may be said to depend upon the *Vijñāna* (consciousness). Consciousness has been compared in the *Milinda Pañha* with a watchman at the middle of the cross-roads beholding all that come from any direction.

Is this consciousness the same as the previous consciousness or different from it? The answer will be that it is the same. Just so, the sun shows itself with all its colours etc., but he is not different from those in truth; and it is said that just when the sun rises, its collected heat and yellow colour also rise then, but it does not mean that the sun is different from these. So the *citta* takes the phenomena of contact, etc. and cognises them. So though it is the same as they are yet in a sense it is different from them.

The theory that the so-called matter is unreal, is also derived from this doctrine. Matter, being momentary, is relative and therefore ultimately unreal. The theory of causal efficiency is also based on it, because each preceding link is casually efficient to produce the succeeding link and thus the capacity to produce an effect becomes the criterion of existence.

The very theory of causation, where cause produces effect which is something new, is a proof of this. "Sour cream comes out of

sweet milk. If there was absolute sameness or absolute difference this could not happen." So it recognises the emergence of the new in the course of change. The essential aspects of dialectics is to recognise the emergence of the new from the old. This recognition of the new makes the dialectical approach, the philosophy of faith in human progress. History is not the repetition of the old events. Human civilisation is a gradual progression from the lower to the higher and further on. Buddhism shares this faith in human progress.

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