

PART I

Chapter I

CAUSALITY

The Buddha claimed that his search for the nature of things led him to the discovery of the uniformity of the causal process (dharmatthitata, dharmaniyanata or simply dhannata). It was the knowledge of the causal pattern that enabled him to put an end to all defiling tendencies and thereby attain freedom (vimutti).¹ This claim of the Buddha has to be evaluated in the light of the background in which various metaphysical theories, such as that of eternal 'soul' or 'self' (ātman), 'inherent nature' (svabhāva), or creator God (isvara), were posited in order to explain the functioning of phenomena. One of the most important of the discourses the Buddha addressed to the monks is the "Discourse on Causal Relations" (Paccaya-sutta) in which he speaks of (1) causality (paticca-samppāda) and (2) causally conditioned phenomena (paticca-samuppāna dhamma).

These two concepts, according to the Buddha, explain everything in this world, the individual things and the relations existing among them.

Before and during the time of the Buddha, the

philosophical atmosphere in India was clouded with many metaphysical theories, and this was so even with regard to the concept of causality. There were three major theories of causality : (1) self-causation (sayan katan), (2) external causation (param katan), and (3) a combination of self and external causation (sayan katan ca param katan ca)¹.

The first was propounded by the Substantialist school, which accepted the reality of the 'self' (atman) and considered causation as being due to the activity of this principle immanent in everything (sarvam). This school, by implication, denied the causal efficacy of any factor outside the 'self'.

The second theory was put forward by the Naturalists who, as a reaction against the idealist metaphysics of the Substantialist school, believed that the functioning of phenomena was due to their inherent nature' (svabhava).

According to the Naturalist theory, 'inherent nature' (svabhava) is a principle governing physical nature and man himself is determined by this physical principle, his psychic personality playing no effective part in his behaviour. The Naturalist conception of causation through 'inherent nature' (svabhava) came to be recognized as a form of 'external causation' (param katan) because, as far as anthropocentric

philosophies are concerned, it denied men's moral responsibility.

The third theory is an attempt to combine the first two theories and was put forward by the Jainas. Although it recognizes both aspects of causation, self-causation as well as external causation, it carried with it all the metaphysical assumptions of the two.

The Buddhist theory of causality seems to have been influenced by the Naturalist theory of 'inherent nature' (svabhāva). Yet it differs from the Naturalist theory in two important ways. First, the Buddhist theory is not confined to physical causation alone, as is the Naturalist theory. An examination of some features of the causal nexus as presented in the early texts will help in understanding the nature of the Buddhist theory of causality.

In the "discourse on Causal Relations", the Buddha mentions four characteristics of causation :

- (1) objectivity (tathatā), (2) necessity (avitathatā),
- (3) invariability (anannathatā), and (4) conditionality (idappaccayata).

These four characteristics are said to be found in the causal relations obtaining among phenomena.

The first emphasizes the objectivity of the causal relation. It was, in fact, intended to refute the claim of some idealist philosophers who belonged to the Upanisadic tradition and who maintained that change, and therefore causation, are mere matters of words, nothing but names (vacarenchanam ... nanadheyam);² in other words, they are mental fabrications having no objective reality. For the Buddha, causation was as real as anything else.

The second and third characteristics, 'necessity' (vyitathara) and 'invariability' (anannathata), stress the lack of exception or the existence of regularity. The fact that a certain set of conditions gives rise to a certain effect and not to something completely different, is one of the basic assumptions of the causal principle. If this feature is not recognized, the basic pattern of events perceived, in this phenomenal world cannot be explained satisfactorily. Events that appear to follow no causal pattern, events that are generally called accidental occurrences, are not really so. It is merely our ignorance of the causal pattern that prompts us to consider them accidental.³

The fourth characteristic of causation, 'conditionality' (idappaccavata), is by far the most significant in that it steers clear of the two extremes - the unconditional necessity implied in strict determinism and the unconditional

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arbitrariness assumed by accidentalism. Hence it was used as a synonym for causation.

On the basis of these characteristics of causation, the Buddha formulated the general formula that is set out in the early discourses as follows :

When this is present, that comes to be;
 from the arising of this, that arises,
 When this is absent, that does not come to be;
 on the cessation of this, that ceases.

This statement, found in many places in the early texts,⁴ explains the conception of causality or causal uniformity which the Buddha arrived at after a perusal of the various instances of causal happening, and which came to be known as the golden mean between the two extremes, eternalism and annihilationism. It is, indeed, the truth about the world which the Buddha claimed he discovered⁵ and which became the "central" doctrine of Buddhism.

One of the significant features to be noted in this conception of causality is the lack of metaphysical assumptions which are generally found in the rationalist theories of causality met with in the later schools of Indian philosophy.

While individual instances of causal happening were verified on the basis of experience, both sensory and

extrasensory, the uniformity of the causal law was reached through inductive inference based on these experiences. While causation itself is a phenomenon experienced, causal uniformity is considered an inductive inference. On the basis of the present experiences of causal happening, inductive inferences are made with regard to the past and the future.⁶

The universal applicability of the causal law is recognized in early Buddhism when it uses this causal principle to explain every phenomenon. A special application of the causal principle is made with reference to the human personality. Psychological processes are also explained in terms of the causal principle.⁷ Furthermore, moral and social, as well as spiritual, behavior find causal explanations.

In short, everything in this universe comes within the framework of causality. Hence, to know causality is to know the truth. This explains the Buddha's statement. "He who perceives causality (particcasamuppada) perceives the dhamma."⁸

The need for a rational and factual description of the life-process and how the so-called individual comes to experience happiness as well as suffering was felt by the Buddha from the very beginning of his career. The necessity of explaining the life-process without contributing to any one of these theories, with which he did not agree, led the

Buddha to devise the twelvefold formula.

The twelvefold formula was presented in the form of a cycle or circle (yatta). The formula is generally stated in the following manner :

When this is present, that comes to be; on the arising of this, that arises. When this is absent, that does not come to be; on the cessation of this, that ceases. That is to say, on ignorance depend dispositions; on dispositions depends consciousness; on consciousness depends the psychophysical personality depend on the six "gateways" [of sense perception]; on the six "gateways" depends contact; on contact depends feeling; on feeling depends craving; on craving depends grasping; on grasping depends becoming; on becoming depends birth; on birth depend aging and death, sorrow and lamentation, suffering, deflection and vexation. In this manner there arises this mass of suffering.⁹

In this special application of the causal principle, ignorance (avijjā) heads the list of twelve factors. It is not the beginning of the cycle of existence, but is one of the most important factors that contribute to evil or unwholesome behaviour, and that when completely eliminated lead to enlightenment and hence to the cessation of suffering. Ignorance is said to condition the dispositions (saṅkhāra) which play a significant role in determining the nature of man's behaviour (kamma). The nature of one's consciousness (viññāṇa) also depends on the nature of the dispositions. Consciousness being the factor that determines the nature of the new psychophysical personality (naṃarūpa), the part played by

the dispositions in determining life after death is emphasized. Dispositions therefore account for the nature of one's behaviour (kamma) as well as one's future birth or rebirth (punabbhava).

The process of rebirth is explained as the combining of the two factors, consciousness (vinnana) and the psychophysical personality (namarupa). The psychophysical personality referred to here is the foetus formed in the mother's womb (gabbha) and which represents the beginning of a new life span. Consciousness surviving from the past is said to become infused in this new personality, and thus a continuity is maintained between the two lives. The latent dispositions in this surviving consciousness therefore determine to a great extent the nature of the new personality.

Since rebirth is the cause of suffering and is invariably associated with decay and death (jara-marana), avoiding future birth or becoming (punabbhava) is the goal of the religious life. How is one able to put an end to future rebirth? According to the causal process it would seem that development of right understanding (samma ditthi), which would replace ignorance (avijja) and the elimination of craving (tanha), which results in non-grasping (anupadana), would put a halt to this process of becoming. Deathlessness or immortality (amata, Sk. amrta) is therefore nothing more

than rebirthlessness or 'becoming-less-ness' (asamabhava).

References

1. Sarvutta-Nikaya 2.18.
2. Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.1, 4-6
3. H. Van Rensseler Wilson, "On Causation" in Determinism and Freedom in the Age of Modern Science, ed. Sidney Hook, New York, pp. 225 ff.
4. Majjhima-Nikaya I 262 ff.
5. Udāna ed. P. Steinthal, London, 1948, 1 ff.
6. Sarvutta-Nikaya 2, 58.
7. Dīgha-Nikaya 3.80 ff.
8. Majjhima Nikaya 1. 190-191.
9. Sarvutta-Nikaya 2.28

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